

Hardest Hue to Hold

Human nature is at its best when unobtrusive, which is when I like to capture it. To preserve, to be a vessel for small scenes with beauty and truth which might have otherwise fallen into oblivion, that is the best work one can do. To preserve with the light touch of a brush, thoughtful strokes, building color until the work is acutely lifelike, not in detail, but in authenticity of the people's emotions, of the spirit of the moment. That is the most important part of preservation.

Before me were two women, dressed plainly, leaning into one another. Hand on the other's arm. They looked at one other, hunched, drooping, thoughtful in their tired eyes. There was mostly lighting on their faces, but it spread to a bit of their torsos, shoulders. Nothing beyond that. It was a way of framing the image, zeroing in on what was important. They sat on simple, wooden, mismatched chairs, which were sitting askew at a table similar in style. They sat in front of a white wall which I portrayed as black. In the scheme of things, these details were largely unimportant to my painting.

This is another part of preserving moments: you must highlight the heart of it and let the rest fade away.

I went about painting the shadowed details: the legs of the table and chairs, differentiating between the dark gray of the background and the dark brown of the wood, just enough. Too much detail would have drawn away from the subject, the women. I made this part, while it was not in real life, cooler in tone, so the viewer could feel the warmth of the women.

Find the emotion, underline it.

I'd first seen this moment in a restaurant, a table in the middle of a crowded room. I was there, eating, casually looking about. I became entranced with two women, positioned about the

same as my models, leaning in, sharing an intimate moment. Melancholy and thoughtful. I was drawn in, from a few tables over, into their world, for it seemed so true. One was sharing horrible news with the other, maybe a death, or perhaps just an emotion stronger than usual, and the feeling was mutual. Feeling lost and alone, she found her friend, in order to feel that inescapable loneliness together. I watched, frozen, afraid to lose the scene, for it was so precious. I then sketched it, multiple times, each a little different, not one better than the rest. Each sketch told the story a little differently. They produced the scene, the truth, and I translated it from them, to a drawing, to models, moving them and tweaking until it felt the same, until the quiet closeness could shine through like it did that day.

The clothing was similar to the original, only, in the version with the models, it was less colorful. Less attention-grabbing. This was a necessity. Like what I did with the background, tearing it out to focus in on what mattered.

Translation is a vital part of preservation, the same things aren't as clear through paint as they are in real life, and the trick is to make the outcome the same.

Next, their faces. I added gold for liveliness. Something that could glow, so that despite the expressions with their tiredness, their subdued sadness, the scene could be enticing. For that had been what I'd loved about the moment, what made me want to be a vessel for it. I made their faces the center, the hearth, making up for the dreariness of the rest.

The models were named Maria and Alexandra. They looked alike, might have almost been sisters, cousins, and I liked that when I was finding them, so that closeness could take on multiple forms. Maria was taller and sat up straighter. She had lips a little quirked up, eyebrows a little scrunched, as if undecided about how to feel: she portrayed the emotion perfectly. Perhaps she really wanted to be an actor, which was far from unusual in my studio. Alexandra was

shorter, with the same dark hair and eyes, thick eyebrows. She leaned back a little further, pulling, drawing Maria in, down into somewhere secret, even. She made the scene move, if just a little, with the way her hair fell, the way her shoulder pointed away from the rest of the scene. Hands holding, the two seemed to be simultaneously fixed to the spot and traveling somewhere else entirely, despite being seated.

Let the bodies reflect the emotion, in ways both obvious and unclear, for the subconscious of the viewer is powerful.

Perhaps an hour before this, all three of us had needed a break. It had been exhausting, for they had not only been holding the position, but acting it out. The canvas I'd been working on had been large, the painting labor intensive. The three of us had not only been tired but sore. I had made sandwiches and we'd sat around my own wooden table. We'd talked, hadn't much beforehand, but it had seemed we had all felt inclined to share. Perhaps the sentiment we had been so intent on recreating: quietly reflective, almost sad, ready to skip over niceties and speak of real things. And so we had, briefly, about hopes and fears. My fear of running out of time, Alexandra's hope of moving to the country and escaping condensed existence, Maria's last three turbulent relationships.

It had seemed that the painting, the scene overall, had permeated into us, its human vessels. I had returned differently, after lunch. The pondering of the scene, or just the lighting, body language, expression, something had started it. I've been told that if you smile long enough you'll become happy, that witnessing joy sparks joy, as well. The closeness of the women in the restaurant, the trust, had inhabited us, had made us reflect on our lives, for no reason other than that the feelings had been created. Or perhaps the feelings, the thoughts, had been lying in wait. Light them and they rise.

This intrusion is one of the dangers of preservation, and yet, one of the beauties.

It was easy for the models to find their places again, and for me to return to my work, for we hadn't truly left. The scene felt natural, like reality.

Only three hands were showing, and I went about adding detail, using the smallest brush I had, making the edges to of one finger to the next clear, portraying the creases of skin on the knuckles. What the hands of the women looked like that day at the restaurant, I didn't know, but Alexandra had a scar on her left pinkie, and I decided to include it. Next, I refined their faces, a little sharper, so they would stand out. The details shifted, even away from the models. I brought Maria's eyebrow downward and made it more curved, too. This worked.

The minutiae does not matter, for the visible is simply a function of portraying the invisible.

When I first had first noticed the pair of women at the restaurant, it had been more than that I'd been intrigued, struck, even. That wasn't quite right. I had been sitting there, eating dispassionately with my wrong hand, charcoal pencil ready to sketch people who were about, but my mind had been elsewhere. My mind had been in a strange, lonesome place, not quite saddened about anything in particular, well, the only word for it: melancholy, a thoughtful melancholy. Only, I'd nobody to share it with. I'd been sitting there, at a table too large for a party of one, my possessions spread about. And then I saw them. And the two of them seemingly sharing so intimately what I had been experiencing alone, that had struck me. I had not been speculating about them. And such is the nature of preserving.

I watched as Maria and Alexandra left the room, and I began to clean up the debris of recreation.

