

CONFERENCE INSIDER

PORTRAIT SOCIETY OF AMERICA
FEBRUARY 4, 2013

FEATURING **MICHELLE DUNAWAY**



Portrait of Richard Schmid
Oil on linen, 10x12



Portrait of Richard Schmid (Detail)



Joan D'Arc, Oil on linen, 16x12



Faithfulness, 16 x 20"

The Importance in Painting by Michelle Dunaway

I was recently talking with friend and fellow artist David Kassan about art and he brought up the subject "What is important painting?" What makes a work of art be deemed as "important"? We agreed that first and foremost an important painting is one that has relevance, but relevance is a very broad term. It is more subjective than objective and that determination depends partly upon the artist and partly upon the viewer. We both agree that capturing an emanation of universal emotion is key for the viewer to connect with the painting. David said that to him relevance means painting the contemporary life that he sees daily and letting emotion resonate through that venue. Relevance to me means capturing a timeless quality, finding the unifying emotions within human beings regardless of time, place, or culture. The desire to capture that beautiful juxtaposition of individual aesthetic differences and emotional unity within human beings is what inspires me to paint portraits. Both of our views are equally valid and equally true based on our own personal experiences and inclinations. Although we didn't get a chance to finish our discussion it left me thinking about the subject...

There is a deep need within human beings to create something meaningful...whether it's through creating art or pursuing a dream of any sort. I think the question to ask ourselves as artists, instead of whether what we are choosing to paint is important is whether what we are choosing to paint is honest. Are we choosing to create from a place of authenticity based on our own individual inclinations?

It's a tricky balance to be the technicians we must be as artists and simultaneously be attentive to the more ephemeral aspects of life we are wanting to portray through paint. On the technical front we constantly must be comparing our painting to our subject (especially in portraiture so as to achieve a likeness) and assessing how it would appear to the viewer. Yet, we must keep in mind our artistic goals; the authentic representation of our intention as the composer of the piece of art. Just as a composer of music, we must make sure that each note is clear and in tune, but when combined result in a harmonious symphony of elements that inspires.

Many times I find that to capture an expression imbued with subtle emotion it is not enough to simply observe, but as the artist I must go further and embody the emotion I wish to convey. Then, within the composition of accurate shapes, color, value and edges there is a semblance of life. It is something I constantly have to remind myself when painting and structuring the elements of form, that the form in painting exists to provide a strong foundation to illuminate life. Capturing a sense of aliveness within the subject then must be paramount in our efforts. After all, it is the witnessing of a moment of life that compels us to paint in the first place.

About a year ago I visited Sorolla's studio in Spain for the first time and gleaned immeasurable inspiration. I was on a painting trip with friends and artists Susan Lyon and Scott Burdick and we visited the house/museum twice during our stay. The first time I was immersed as an artist in seeing the brushwork in person and the color nuances of the original paintings. The technician in me was soaking in as much information as possible. During the second visit I was emotionally struck by what this man did with his authentic and unique voice through painting. He traveled the world studying the masterworks of other artists in museums and then returned to Spain to paint the people and places that he loved, that were relevant to him and unique to his experiences. Seeing the portraits of his wife and children took on new meaning, I had appreciated them as an artist, now I was appreciating them as a human being. Walking through his studio I could feel the intense love and passion he had for his chosen subjects.

We, as artists, might vacillate between painting our own inclinations for individual inspiration or painting commissions, but I believe there is a way to dive in and find the resonance no matter the subject. It comes from the artist's intention to connect on a deeper level. When we enter into that place of creation that exists between the subject, ourselves, and the painting, and just determine to be honest and attentive, there is an authenticity that becomes palpable and that results in a painting that is relevant and important to this world.

Editor's Note: Michelle Dunaway will be one of the 15 artists painting simultaneously during the Thursday Face-off from 5:00 – 7:00pm. In addition, Michelle will also paint alongside David Kassan during the Friday Breakout Class entitled Varying Viewpoints from 2:00-4:00 and share her approach to the portrait during the Saturday Lunch & Learn program.