

Scratching the surface with artist Cindy Suter

Painter Cindy Suter is just as interested in surfaces as she is in what lies below them. And as a portrait artist, she is interested not so much in the face she sees, but what those faces might be concealing. “It’s what is right beneath the surface that I find so fascinating,” she says.

A former sculptor working in bronze and steel, Cindy rediscovered her love of painting in preparation for her move to Toronto from Arkansas three and a half years ago. She also changed mediums – she paints in acrylic now rather than oil – and subject matter. “I needed to work on a series that would help me transition to painting, so I decided to do portrait studies of individuals. I had never really done portraits before, so it was a total shift.”

Cindy started modestly, painting portraits of friends and family. Then she got ambitious. “I decided to paint portraits of all 44 U.S. presidents. It took me a about two and a half years.” Those paintings are now the subject of a coffee table book on the history of portraiture that Cindy hopes will be ready for publication later this fall.

A contemporary artist rather than a realist, some of her portraits are almost abstract, she says, while others look exactly like their subject.

“I tell everyone who wants me to paint them: ‘You’ve seen my portraits and you know my approach. As long as you allow me the freedom to do your portrait the way it develops naturally, then I’m happy to do it.’ That’s my caveat. “Because once I put the initial sketch onto the canvas I have no idea what direction it will go in. It just seems to move or take on the form and direction it needs to. It’s almost as if someone else is directing my hand.”

Those who make the leap of faith are never disappointed with the result, a candid portrait that reveals much more than the photograph from which it was painted.

“There’s an expression I’m looking for in each person – that instant when they are not posing; when they are not thinking about having their picture taken and are off somewhere else.”

And there’s something else. “I paint my canvasses black. A lot of my paintings have an urban edge. I distress the surface and that allows the black to come through.”

Cindy’s style is influenced by the graffiti art that so inspires her. “I really respond to graffiti – not just the images you see on a wall, but the paint that’s peeling beneath the surface and the bricks and the rust and everything that comes through and merges and mingles with the work. When I paint, I try to bring that same vision into my paintings. I like to scratch through the surface – peel back

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the layers – and allow the colours underneath to come through.

“It’s a reflection of life. Beneath the image that we present to the world, there is a past that we keep hidden. And yet, all the layers that came before, all the weathering, occasionally shows through. My portraits show not just who we have become, but what we were before.”

Cindy has her own history. “In the beginning, if a painting wasn’t exactly what I wanted, I ripped it up and threw it away. I didn’t think my work stood up compared to the masters and other artists I respected. At 61, I’m comfortable with my own work and my own style. It’s different, and some people might not like it, but that doesn’t bother me anymore. Everyone looks at art with their own eyes and everyone sees something different.”

Cindy also knows that she is continuously improving. “Each canvas presents a new challenge. If I’m not happy with the result, at least I learn from the process. And as long as I’m learning, I’m happy.

“I have definitely evolved as a portrait artist. It’s fun to look at a series, like the presidents,



and see how the portraits have changed over time; how each painting incorporates something I learned painting the one before.”

So what’s next? “I’ll probably do a series of people viewing art at galleries. At the Chagall exhibit at the AGO I sat back and watched people as they viewed the paintings. I liked their shapes and silhouettes. I’ve started working on that project and someone suggested I do the Canadian prime ministers.”

Then there is the fingerprint series. “I’ve been collecting fingerprints for 15 years. I carry around a stamp pad and I get my friends and family to stamp their little fingerprints and sign their name. Some of my early bronze sculptures were based on my own fingerprints – my first self portraits! – and I know I’ll work in that direction again.”

In the meantime, she draws her inspiration from the people around her. Not just the people who commission her to paint their portraits, but people on the street, on the subway, on the streetcar. “They are all in their own world, and they all have that expression I love. Who knows what they’re thinking about – it could be their shopping list – but they are totally self contained. I am fascinated with that look.”

Cindy is also fascinated by the people in her own neighbourhood. The homeless in particular.

“You never know their story. To me, that’s a fascinating thing about humanity. What are those layers and those things that make us who we are today? Doing portraits is my way of telling those stories.”



Previous page, Bird; Left, Adams, Massive, Viewing Chagall; Top, Cindy at work in her studio, Fabulous

Cindy Suter

www.suterart.com | cindysuter@gmail.com | 647-351-6929

Current works can be viewed at Hangman Art Gallery, 756 Queen St. East