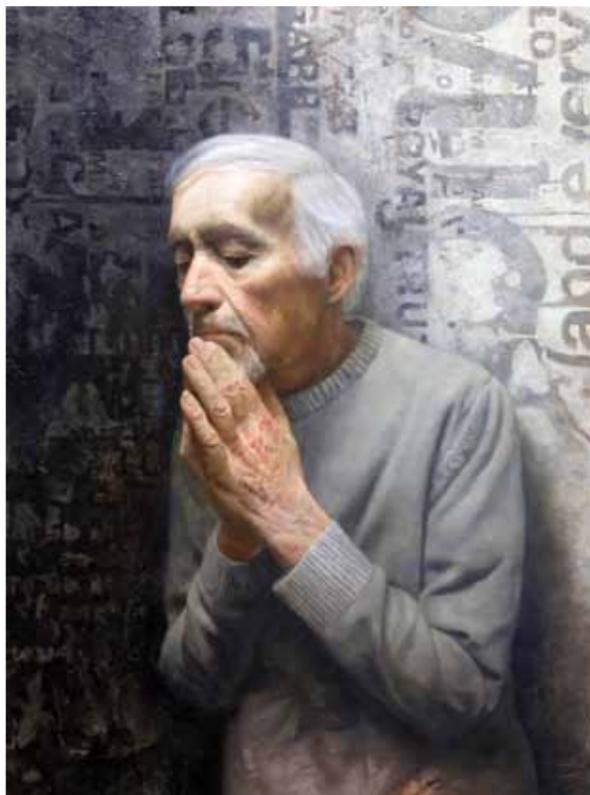


A Contemporary Approach to



Solemn the Barron
2011, oil on panel, 30 x 20.
All images of artwork this article courtesy the artist.

Portraiture

Portraiture is a popular genre of study for artists of all levels. During a recent workshop, **David Jon Kassan** showed students how he creates emotive, lifelike portraits.

by **ERIC SUTPHIN**



LEFT
Kassan conducting one of several demonstrations during his five-day workshop.

PHOTO: ROB ZELLER

David Jon Kassan has built a following among painters who seek to capture a sensitive likeness of a model while maintaining an expressive quality. A few years ago he developed “The Contemporary Portrait,” a workshop that offers an opportunity for intensive study, lively discussion, and presents new possibilities for portrait drawing and painting. He recently held a five-day iteration of this popular workshop at the Teaching Studios of Art’s Brooklyn location, where he taught a small group of painters how to achieve an accurate representation of the sitter by developing a studied drawing that serves as a kind of underpainting, and by using broken color to create realistic skin tones.

The first two days of the course focused on creating an accurate figure drawing in charcoal, and three days were dedicated to creating an

oil painting. The same model was used all five days, giving participants more than 30 hours to work from life. The instructor began the first day with a drawing demonstration on toned paper using charcoal and pastel. He first laid in large shadows in the head because “by finding the large shapes, the basic structure of the face begins to come together,” he explained. Kassan used the eyes as an anchor to help get accurate measurements and correct placement of landmarks and advised students to do the same. Over all five days, the instructor reserved the morning for a demonstration of how to put various concepts and techniques

into practice and offered detailed explanations of his decision-making. The small class quickly developed a sense of camaraderie that helped in the learning

Mom (Work in Progress)
2012,
oil on panel,
48 x 32.

process. “I think this was because David is such a generous teacher,” says workshop assistant Robin Kappy of the class’ success. “He meets each person where they are in their painting education, so it’s not like everyone’s rushing to understand and implement a single concept. Everyone feels like they’re in it together.”

Students worked to develop a clear vision through direct and focused observation. Kassan’s materials list included binoculars, which the artist employs in his own process. “The binoculars weren’t meant for poring over minute details,” Kappy explains, “but were used to help see how shapes relate to one another. Before you can even get



into detail, you have to focus on the interrelationship and context of large and small shapes.” Part of what makes Kassan’s portraits so compelling is his ability to convey the sitter’s personality and emotion, and this is a direct result of looking carefully. As he used the binoculars to home in on areas of the figure, Kassan said, “It’s really beautiful. I really want to understand what’s going on here.” By taking such a close look, artists are forced to let go of what they think they know about the figure and respond to what’s in front of them. “I always want the emotional response to the model to be present,” Kassan said to students. The first day of drawing began with a rough block-in that was instructed to be as “expressive as possible,” so that each artist’s emotional response would be prevalent from his or her first strokes—and able to be translated and heightened as the portrait progressed.

On the second day, students used charcoal and PanPastel to further

refine the initial drawing. For Kassan, this phase is about being deliberate, which can only come from having a thorough understanding of each shape and using this information to make decisions as he works around his surface. “Don’t stay in one place too long,” he advised. “Move around to check the relationships.” When the artist isn’t using binoculars, he likes to step back from his surface and take in the entire work in progress—as well as the model’s pose—to see what, if anything, needs to be adjusted or added.

On the third day, Kassan had participants transfer their drawing to a Masonite panel primed with a medium-gray ground. He conducted a brief demonstration during which it was clear that as he began to consider color, he focused on the patterns of light and dark and movement of light across the form. He notes

that, as with his drawing, he is constantly adjusting as he paints and in the process discovers new or previously unseen color interactions. “The painting is in a constant state of movement and flux,” Kassan explains. “Nothing gets static—the painting needs to stay alive throughout the entire process.”

The instructor’s preferred mediums are M. Graham’s walnut alkyd medium and stand oil, which he uses to give his paint a range of viscosities. He asserts that artists can add an emotive quality

to their work through the use of broken color passages, which they can create as they mix color directly while observing the model.

To aid in this process, Kassan works on a vertical palette of his own design. While attending the Art Students League of New York, he developed lower-back pain from constantly moving between his palette and easel, and

he thought it would create less stress on his back if his palette was as close to his painting as possible. In his search for a solution he designed a slim palette that rests vertically next to the painting. It did much more than relieve his back pain. “I soon found that I was a much better painter,” he says. “When the palette is waist-high, it usually means that

it is in your shadow or is farther away from the light that’s on your painting. Why would you mix color in one lighting environment and place it into another? The new palette was in the same exact light as the painting, which meant that my mixtures much more accurately depicted what I was seeing. Painting from life is so much about your short-term memory; I found that I was able to scan the model and just slightly turn my head to mix and place the color of what I saw.”

This ingenious palette design is just one more byproduct of what the instructor refers to as “visual research.” At the end of each of his demonstrations, Kassan’s workshop participants were eager to conduct research of their own, hoping their findings would yield portraits that go far beyond capturing a likeness. **W**

Eric Sutphin is a freelance writer who resides in New York City.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

David Jon Kassan studied painting and art history at Syracuse University, the Art Students League of New York, and the National Academy School of Fine Art, all in New York. He has lectured and conducted workshops around the world. To order a copy of the artist’s DVD, visit <http://dvd.davidkassan.com>. If you’re interested in his vertical palette or drawing materials, visit www.parallepalette.com and www.generalpencil.com/kassan.

PHOTO: ROBIN KAPPY



ABOVE

Kassan’s demonstration painting next to his vertical palette.

BELOW LEFT

Kassan likes working with a small brush, which more closely relates the drawing and painting process.

BELOW RIGHT

Kassan further refined the portrait as the workshop came to a close.



PHOTO: ROBIN KAPPY



PHOTO: CECILY NICOLE GAITHER



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