

Visual Art Review

August Burns' 'Beyond the Portrait': 'We want, need, love people'

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent

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August Burns: "Modern Sophistication"

'I find this incredible beauty in everyone's face. I'm drawn to people and spend my life working with people. When I feel I capture a person in their portrait, it will just take me to tears,' said August Burns last week, sitting in the North Branch Café, surrounded by faces — faces of other patrons, but also faces in more than 20 of her portraits, hanging on the café walls.

“Beyond the Portrait,” a solo exhibition of Burns’ paintings, continues at Montpelier’s North Branch Café through December. Members of Burns’ family, former Vermont governor Madeleine Kunin, women at an event in Burlington, a young neighbor, and professional models who posed for Zoom sessions during the COVID lockdown are among her many subjects.

Burns’ sensitivity and masterful technique invite viewers to engage with the people she paints. The direct look in the eye of a young man, the tilt of a young woman’s chin — in gestures, the way light strikes their faces, tiny details of expression, she conveys character and individuality.

For Burns, who lives in Middlesex, art started early.

“I was an art kid, always doing it,” she explained, noting that her mother, recognizing her enthusiasm, convinced an artist who usually only taught adults to take her on as a student.

A young artists’ group grew as friends also studied with him, and Burns noted, “we spent as much time there as we could.”

Burns initially studied art in college but found that the art department at that time was focused on Abstract Expressionism, while she was drawn to realism. Instead of an art major, she pivoted to women’s health care.



August Burns: “Dancer”



August Burns: “Charles”

In her 34-year career as a midwife, physician's assistant and health consultant, Burns delivered more than 400 babies, directed programs in cervical cancer prevention in several countries, trained health care providers serving hard to reach populations, and more.

Twenty years ago, with retirement from her medical career, Burns leapt back into her art practice. Since then, her work has been exhibited around the country, she has won awards including in exhibitions of the Portrait Society of America, and in 2016 was commissioned to paint the official portrait of outgoing Gov. Peter Shumlin. That portrait hangs in the Vermont State House in Montpelier.

Burns is inspired by classical Renaissance art and 19th century European figurative painters and focuses on portraits and the human figure in her artwork.

Portraits, she noted, attract us, "because people are compelling to us. We want, need, love people."

At North Branch Café, her subjects are a diverse group.



August Burns: "Woman with a Fur Hat"

A line of four women each have different expressions as their attention is directed the same way. One looks down pensively, another has a faint hint of a smile, one tilts her head up. The four were at an Emerge Vermont event. Emerge is an organization recruiting and training Democratic women who want to run for public office. Burns was struck by the group and photographed them — using that image as the basis for her painting.



August Burns: "Tessa"

One group of portraits is from Burns' family collection. Her two beautiful grandchildren are there; her granddaughter, in a striped sundress holds a soft fabric animal toy, a giraffe face peeking out below her arm.

Painting children, Burns noted, "is like painting ice cream. There's not a wrinkle or blemish on that skin."

Burns' daughter-in-law was hesitant to have a conventional portrait, so instead Burns suggested a riff on a painting she knew. In the earlier work, in the art deco style, a woman in a plumed hat sits at a café table. Burns' daughter-in-law, with her own dress and accessories — plus a hat that she found that fit the style — strikes the same pose

at a red café table. Instead of the older painting's teacup, she has her preferred French press and coffee cup.

The show includes about 10 paintings Burns did during the isolation of the COVID pandemic when she was unable to paint models in person. Friends who have an art atelier in Austin, Texas, started organizing weekly Zoom meetings. They hired and posed professional models. Sessions were joined by artists from around the United States and even some from Europe.

“For three hours a week, we would create community, talking and painting and continuing to hone our craft. It was pure joy,” Burns said.

Five of Burns' portraits in the exhibition are offered through a silent auction with proceeds benefitting Montpelier flood recovery.

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North Branch Café

North Branch Café presents “Beyond the Portrait,” paintings by Middlesex artist August Burns, through December at 41 State St. in Montpelier. Hours are: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 5 p.m. Saturday; for information, call 802-454-3245 or go online to augustburns.com A silent auction of five paintings benefits Montpelier flood recovery.



August Burns: “Barrettes”