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Behind Charcoal Eyes

Kristi Tingwald

As the golden fingers of autumn stretched across the quiet neighborhood outside, the open window served as a portal to a symphony of delights. The crisp, honeyed breeze whispered through the rustling leaves, in through the screen of the window, carrying with it secrets no one could possibly know. The sun, now a warm, gentle artist, bathed the room in a soft, amber glow, as if it were carefully brushing strokes of gold onto every surface it touched. One such surface was a wooden desk, laden with markers, paints, and colored pencils, each illuminated and vibrant from the soft touch of the sun. Almost in unison with the gust of wind, the soft crackle of a seemingly ancient vinyl album crescendos into a crisp, classic tune from the 1970's. On the floor lies a plethora of similar records, each smelling like the smoky basement they once lived in generations before. To mask the smell, a candle entitled "Bourbon Pumpkin" fills the air, unfurling a harmonious duet of autumn's finest offerings. The rich scent of bourbon blends with the spicy warmth of freshly baked pumpkin pie that a grandmother might whip up on Thanksgiving. It's a symphony of comfort, a tantalizing fusion of sweetness and complexity that dances through the air. There on the wooden desk lies a thick piece of clean, white paper, ready to be exploited. The still glowing markers, paints, and colored pencils sit, warming up for their use. Yet, before one stroke, line, or sketch can be rendered, the vinyl booming through the room begins to crackle again, and fade out into a silence, only to be broken by the next flip of the record.

Every artistic process, be it visual, musical, or physical, has its own aura. The aforementioned scene described is specifically mine, and for me, there is no art without the process. The beauty of my environmental setup is just as vital as the art conjured up on the page. My bedroom, where I work on all of my art, is just like the blank canvas that I draw on. When I enter that room, the simplest things inspire me. The radiating sunlight peeking through the blinds, the ancient record player, and the candle I received many Christmases ago, call my name, and make me feel something that is very difficult to explain. All together in unison, these accessories allow me to see the illuminating charm of the smallest details in life, the simple things. For me, it is complex to put this feeling into words, so I put it on paper, and bring it to life. My forte is usually portraits, a form of visual art that many might find potentially boring and uninspiring. However, I see it in the exact opposite way. Just like in my artistic set up, I try to take a portrait, something simple, and portray a deeper beauty. I find it greatly important and inspiring to dig deeper in all aspects of life: the sounds of music, the smells around me, the glowing of the sun. Yet, if you cannot personally see and experience these sensations, you might see my portraits for what they are on a surface level: simple.

With the dawn of a new song climbing out of the record player, the sketches begin to appear lightly on the bare page of artist paper. First, a soft and dense pencil dances along the page, looking

for where to go next. The lines find themselves outlining a portrait of a young woman, whoever she might be. The lips, nose, hair, and cheeks practically draw themselves, each given a soft, feminine guise. Yet, the pencil stops when the only detail left to sketch is the eyes. The rest of the woman seems beautifully generic, but it seems that the pencil believes the eyes deserve something more. Should she display smiling eyes, the kind of squint that makes the viewers smile subconsciously? Should she have eyes that suggest a calm numbness that simply stares back into the eyes of the person outside the page? Or should her eyes display a sharp yearning that seems to exist outside the realm of the square paper? Each of these expressions on her would be beautiful, no doubt, but there seems to be a right choice in the moment of her creation.

The pencil begins to etch in those effective yearning eyes that pull the viewer into the page. Once a plain draft of her is complete, the medium of color is chosen. A mixture of alcohol markers and colored pencils work their way to the page to replace the dull pencil, giving the young woman life. Luscious lips, rosy cheeks, and glistening hair appear within hours without break, unless, of course, the vinyl needed changing. Again, the eyes are the last to be touched. A glowing and vibrant woman sits on the page, yet her eyes stay dull with only dusty graphite scratching their surface. The wind continues to blow as the sun begins to sink into the horizon, making the pencil shavings on the wooden desk waver and dance. Finally, color seeps into the woman's eyes. Her dark pupils are almost reflective, and her irises are as vibrant as the sunset occurring outside in this quiet neighborhood. Finally, the woman begins to jump out of the page, seemingly yearning for something in the outside world. Once more the crackle of the record indicating the finish of the album side fills the air. Her portrait is complete.

Now you can see how a seemingly simple portrait is, perhaps, not quite so simple. I have already expressed the lure of everyday objects all around us, but now I want to display the lure of everyday people. When coming face to face with a new person, we all see the same things: their face, their features, their bodies. Seems pretty common and boring right? Indeed, we are all pretty similar when first introduced to new eyes, yet when we look again, really look, we can see so much more. When we look deeply into someone's eyes, even for just a few moments, we can gather vital information. In just one glance, we can see who they really are. Some people's eyes hide it a bit more, but for others, their eyes can express exactly what they are feeling without saying anything at all. There is, of course, a reason why they say, "the eyes are the key to the soul." Some eyes, like the girl in my portrait, show yearning. Some show happiness and content. And for others, they show deep sorrow. These gatherings allow us to form a deeper connection and understanding. This is the notion I strive to present in my art. Though some may not grasp it right away when looking at my portraits, to me, they offer a constant display and reminder of the importance of awareness, as without it, we miss so much from life.

The woman now, with her longing eyes, stares out at a group of people looking back at her. Her vibrant strokes glisten and sweat in the spotlight shining down on her. She sits next to other glowing portraits, crafted by unknown hands. Along down the wall sits a small, shining plaque reading: "Scholastic Art Winners." Many pass her by, slowly walking, then suddenly stopping to allow their eyes to lock with hers. One woman in particular stays a while, moving closer and closer to get a better look, so close that the woman in the picture can feel her slow breaths repeatedly on her. The viewer seems as if she has been sucked into the young woman's eyes, almost in a trance as other passersby come and go. When she finally breaks away, the woman continues to survey the other vibrant pieces strategically placed along the smooth, white wall. Her shoes click in an echo against the creaky wooden museum floor as she makes her way for the exit, yet still, she cannot forget the young woman's eyes that hang across the room.

What good is art without a purpose? Though each work entails a different level of meaning, some messages are just easier to pick out than others. Art does not need to be a big production of happiness, sadness, or drama. When I view art, I find it so much more satisfying when I must take a journey through my mind in order to understand a piece of work. So, that is how I, in turn, create my art. Seeking beauty and understanding in something simple is the journey I want my viewers to explore. What will their conclusion be of my work after their journey? That I do not know, nor do I care. The importance is that my viewer sees something and understands something thought provoking. Maybe, in this young woman I created, they see not yearning eyes, but sad or concerned eyes. Or maybe they do see her yearning eyes, and wonder what she is looking for, what she has gone through. That is the golden moment in art. That moment when the viewer has a reflective moment, even if just briefly, is the reason I share my art with others. The most satisfying instant is when I can see the journey happening through their eyes. For the community of people that see my art, their identity stands in what they take from it. The person viewing the piece makes all the difference. The collage of thoughts from each person that encapsulates a plethora of what the meaning of the piece may be is what makes art fulfilling.

The woman eventually comes off the wall. Away from the public eye, she travels back to the desk from which she was crafted, back to where she was just an idea. Next to her sits the outline of a new woman, a woman not yet with eyes. Markers, paints, and pencils once again surround her, still illuminated by the setting sun. A new tune plays on the old record player, one the woman had not yet heard before. I sit back down at my desk, evaluating, almost stuck, on how I should create my new portrait, when the woman once hung on the museum wall catches my attention. I once more look into those yearning eyes. I knew in her I felt this deep connection, though she was just an image on a once blank piece of paper. After minutes on end evaluating what this connection was, it came to me. In my life, I have always had this pining, a longing, for something more, though for what I do not know. I could see it in her eyes. I may come across as just another brick in the wall, much like a portrait, but there is so much more to me, to us, than at first glance. Maybe, just maybe, the woman is me.