



DONNA FESTA CAPTURING GLIMPSES

by James Scarborough

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They are the cutest couple imaginable. Both are elderly.

That much you can tell from their white hair and the way the man stands slightly stooped, which makes him a bit shorter than the woman. They're both dressed in bleh colors - browns, off greens - that go well with the pasty color of their faces. The lines of both bodies curve slightly upward to the left, as if they're two pieces of an interlocking puzzle. The woman carries a white purse. It looks though as if the man links his hand in hers, both as a sign of affection and as an aid to help bear for what is perhaps, for the woman, a heavy burden. They are caught abruptly in mid-shuffle. Their noncommittal gazes register curiosity if not surprise, as if they've been looking at their feet, navigating such obstacles as tree roots that push up through the sidewalk or else pondering an unplayable game of hopscotch etched in chalk before them.

It's those gazes that are so telling, innocent, knowing and mildly impatient. The couple has monumentality. They have heft. They carry the wisdom of their experiences, their trials, and their exultations. If anyone bothered to ask, they could tell you all you needed to know about life and love, destiny and happenstance. But no one would bother to ask because, despite their presence, they are mostly the essences distilled from long lives. Slowing fading away, they're there, but not really. And that's a shame, not to profit from the life stories of one's elders.

"Old Couple" is from a series of recent work in oil by Maine-based artist Donna Festa. She attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia where she got a four-year certificate in painting, the University of the Arts where she got a BFA in painting, and the University of Hartford in Connecticut, where she got her MFA.

Festa does profit, artistically at least, from what went before. She paints and draws figures, mostly. In that respect, she's part of a great tradition of figurative artists. You think more recently of the stalwarts of the School of London - Leon Kosoff, Francis Bacon, and Lucian Freud. You hear that figuration, under the onslaught of first, abstraction and conceptual art and, now, virtual reality, is dead, is obsolete. That it has no relevance. That it doesn't keep pace with the times. And yet the trope manages to resurrect and assert itself. In Festa's case, it never went away.

These are narratives. Each painting is a story, an encounter, a race against time. Together these narratives comprise a scrapbook whose faces tell a story. No specifics are needed because the human condition is story of everyone. It's akin to that supposed moment before you die, when everyone you ever knew or met flashes before your eyes in the beat of a heart. She paints quickly. As she says, she works "in one sitting, in order to keep the loose, fresh quality of a sketch." Similarly the scale is small, to permit a quick rendering of quiddities and quirks of the sitter.

Festa's the doyenne of empathy. Her interest in faces stems from family get-togethers she attended when young. Her mother had eight siblings. When they assembled for meals, she'd carefully read the faces of her aunts and uncles, gleaning corresponding personalities, a trait she later translated to paint.

Her work is as much about capturing the nature of the sitter as it about showcasing the nature of her paint. She doesn't define her subjects, once and for all. Instead, as she says, she wants to "capture glimpses of complex characters by the post-Freudian dissolution of the self in the age of virtual reality." It's a perfect marriage of subject and material. Like her subjects, paint is complex and unpredictable. It moves in all directions at once. All the chemical processes of thought, all the visceral processes of psychology, all the kinetic processes of movement – you can see them in the way she handles paint. She's the medium between her media and her subjects. You can imagine the setting of the portrait-making as a séance.

It shows. Seemingly spontaneous blobs of paint represent eyes, noses, mouths, and lips. Festa's economy of means is staggering. A single brush stroke, a daub of paint here or there, and she NAILS not just the physiognomy of the sitter but also the temporal circumstances of the sitting. Sometimes the paint is especially evident. Its texture captures the flabbiness of skin, of fleshy lips, and drooping eyes. Sometimes particular features predominate a piece. It's as if, during the sitting's short duration, the artist suddenly noticed a distinctive chin, a tilt of the head, or a shock of hair. Other times it's shorthand, the better to capture a moment before it passes.

Her biggest achievement? She combines monumentality and spontaneity. You don't normally find those two words together when you describe a small oil painting. You do here. You see it in the vigorous chin of "*Woman with Her Hair Up*." That chin, merely a few daubs of paint, is as sturdy as the Rock of Gibraltar. You see it in the incredibly strong closed mouth in "*Happy Birthday Evie Smith*."



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That mouth, rendered in a single brushstroke, is as steadfast as Fort Knox. You see it in the pinprick eyes in "*Black Tie, White Shirt*." Those eyes are not just windows to the soul they are portals to the wisdom of the ages. Finally, you see it in the forearm in "*Man Holding a Dog*." That man's arm may be thin as a twig but there's no doubt it has a rebar hold on his little friend.

Beauty? It's there but it's an afterthought. The following quote by Seymour Remenick adorns her web site. "If the beautiful arrives at all it will arrive unannounced." And when it does arrive unannounced, it's the most simple, profound and obvious thing in the world. Like a feather that drops into Forrest Gump's lap in the eponymous film.

www.donnafesta.com

(previous page) **Black Tie, White Shirt**
oil on panel, 6 x 6in., 2014

(facing page) **Woman with Her Hair Up**
oil on panel, 6 x 6in., 2014

(right) **Old Couple**
oil on panel, 8 x 8in., 2014

(bottom) **Man Holding a Dog**
oil on panel, 6 x 6in., 2014

