



ART REVIEW: Portraits Express the Historical in Painterly Narratives

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by Eric Ernst

In “Barbed Wire and Picket Fences,” the current exhibition at [RJD Gallery](#) in Sag Harbor, the two artists presented each offer their own perspective on the different uses of narrative in contemporary portraiture.

Artists [Charlotta Janssen](#) and [Phillip Thomas](#) create portrait images expressing historical narratives through the use of various techniques and methodologies, both juxtapositional and complementary. But the two artists reflect the complexities and subtleties of constructing painterly storylines via representational depiction in dramatically different ways.

Further, Janssen and Thomas conjure stories that—in contrast to the printed word, which uses a systematic configuration to express ideas—draw on different devices to allow their stories to unfold in multiple directions simultaneously. This approach grants a measure of freedom in expression that liberates the artists from literal narrative interpretation of a particular subject. It allows them, as [Umberto Boccioni](#) once stated, “to paint its atmosphere.”

The specific ambiance that Charlotta Janssen strives to reflect is the civil rights movement of the latter half of the 20th century. Using a singularly elemental palette mixing painterly techniques with collage, the artist is able to replicate the personal struggles of that era, accentuated compellingly by the undeniable elegance, righteousness, and dignity of the subjects of her works.

This kind of impact is particularly apparent in [Bayard Rustin](#) (acrylic, iron oxide, oil and collage on canvas), a portrait of the famed civil rights leader whose steely gaze reflects a stolid resolve and real determination. Staged as a painterly mug shot, with jailhouse photos of other civil rights pioneers collaged in the lower quadrant, the work gains even more power from the copy of the arrest warrant for Rosa Parks that occupies the backdrop portion of the canvas.



“Bayard Rustin” by Charlotta Janssen. Acrylic, iron oxide, oil and collage on canvas.

In addition, by superimposing Parks’s fingerprints taken at the jailhouse into the forefront over Rustin’s collar, the artist manages to flatten the picture plane while establishing an immediate

connection between different generations of civil rights activists.

These traits, of unyielding tenacity and steadfastness, are also evident in [Mary Jean Smith](#) (acrylic, iron oxide, oil and collage on canvas), a portrait of an early member of the [Freedom Riders](#). This group was dedicated to the desegregation of the interstate bus system throughout the American South. Interestingly, knowing she would be arrested, Smith carried a slip of paper with her lawyer's telephone number; in Janssen's portrait, it appears as if the number is tattooed on her forehead.



"Mary Jean Smith" by Charlotta Janssen. Acrylic, Iron Oxide, oil and collage on canvas.

Seated Sportsmen (acrylic, iron oxide, oil and collage on canvas) is also of note for the manner in which the artist, picturing only the hands and legs of her subjects, presents a quiet dignity that is powerfully underscored by the entertainingly expressive use of collaged canvas strips to heighten the pictorial narrative.



"Seated Sportsmen" by Charlotta Janssen. Acrylic, Iron Oxide, oil and collage on canvas.

Interestingly, perhaps the most powerful work by Janssen in the exhibit portrays more recent subjects of social inequities: victims of the housing bubble implosion of the last decade and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Titled *I Want To Thank Bank of America For My Adjustable Rate Mortgage* (acrylic, iron oxide, oil and collage on canvas), the painting carries echoes of [Grant Woods's American Gothic](#) while the central figures seem to hark back to the loads from [John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath."](#)



"I Want To Thank Bank of America For My Adjustable Rate Mortgage" by Charlotta Janssen. Acrylic, Iron Oxide, oil and collage on canvas.

By contrast, Phillip Thomas, who hails from the Caribbean, offers a narrative of that region's history of European colonialism and its continuing sociological and political ramifications absent any apparent measure of judgment or condemnation.

Offering what seems at first a more straightforward style of portraiture—because of the direct manner in which his subjects confront the viewer—his use of fabric textures and different applications of paint takes the works in unpredictable directions, fashioning almost abstract motifs within them. Interestingly, this technique seems to enhance the classical overtones of the paintings and seamlessly manages to generate connections to longstanding painterly traditions in art history.

Of particular interest is *Dem Ova Deh Suh, Wih Ova Yah Suh* (oil and mixed media on canvas) depicting an authoritarian military leader, his dark uniform bedecked with medals and other accoutrements of totalitarian swagger. This sense of dictatorial dominance is tempered by the interestingly whimsical flowered and textured canvas surface of the background.



"Dem Ova Deh Suh, Wih Ova Yah Suh" by Phillip Thomas.
Oil and mixed media on canvas.

The surface narrative of the piece is also altered by the inclusion among the many medals of a blue awareness ribbon that could be signaling support for addiction recovery awareness, chronic fatigue syndrome awareness, colon cancer awareness, or, for a deft stroke of irony, a "beat bullying" initiative in the United Kingdom.

Exit (oil on canvas), by contrast, is a full length portrait that, in its powerful use of color and expressively energetic brush strokes, offers a figure frozen in place yet surrounded by elements of movement and vibrancy. The effect here is to create a great sense of movement within the picture plane. This sensibility is juxtaposed against—and enhanced by—the vertical components making up the picket fence in the background and the geometric shapes the artist uses to construct the central figure's sport jacket.



"Exit" by Phillip Thomas. Oil on canvas.

Perhaps the most subtle, and at the same time most highly charged of Thomas's works is *Ode to Invisible Man* (mixed media on panel), an homage to the author [Ralph Ellison](#), whose 1952 novel addressed the burgeoning social, political, and intellectual issues facing African-Americans in the

20th century.

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“Ode to Invisible Man” by Phillip Thomas. Mixed media on canvas.

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BASIC FACTS: “Barbed Wire and Picket Fences,” featuring the artwork of Charlotta Janssen and Phillip Thomas, is on view April 9 to May 5, 2016 at RJD Gallery, 90 Main Street, Sag Harbor, NY 11963. www.rjdgallery.com

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