

Face Time

Painter Connie Hayes quietly draws the Rockland community

By Scott Sell



Connie Hayes. Photo by Scott Sell.

When Connie Hayes turned sixty-six last year, she started doing a series of self-portraits. It was something of a surprise to a Maine painter who has spent her career focusing on work that is largely comprised of landscapes and still life studies: bucolic French gardens, gridlock in Manhattan, Vinalhaven at dusk.

She did twenty-five drawings, refreshing her knowledge of anatomy and the structural elements of the face. She wasn't interested in having versions of her own face leave the privacy of her studio but she was nevertheless invigorated by the exercise. She put out

a community-wide call, asking if people would sit for her to have their portraits drawn and, over the months of January and February of this year, Hayes drew one hundred portraits of people throughout the Rockland area.

Titled "Face Time," the project aimed to create a visual dialogue to represent the cross section of the Midcoast area.

"This project is full of affection for the people I have worked with and have more recently met," Hayes says. "Rockland is a place where people say hello, tellers at the bank know who you are, and I wanted to

spend more concentrated time with people in my town."

Born in Gardiner—where there wasn't any art happening in the 1960s, she says—Hayes spent many years on the move: Rome, Manhattan, Philadelphia. In every new city, she further sharpened her painting, teaching, and arts administration skills. But something about Maine pulled her back and she spent several years in Portland before settling in Rockland in 2005 with her husband. Since then, she has been ceaselessly involved in making new work, as well as new connections with members of the community.

“Each face has a story behind it.”

She wasn't sure at first if she'd be able to convince one hundred people to sit down with her for an hour. They had busy lives, after all. But word of mouth in a small city prevailed and the project quickly had sixty people interested, then eighty. A waiting list started. She had begun with people—older women, mostly—she had worked with on committees or met through a weekly networking breakfast. People she admired. But as conversations grew about who was contributing to Rockland's vitality, she began to include more men, more young people, more entrepreneurs. She became excited to include the woman who drove a school bus for thirty years and the man who taught art history at the state prison, just as much as local politicians and Main Street business owners.

“Each face has a story behind it,” Hayes says. “The fun of discovery can continue if



Artwork by Connie Hayes. Photo by Scott Sell.

you are curious about who is among us by asking each other, ‘So who do you know on this wall?’”

Using a corner of the Dowling Walsh Gallery as her workspace, with little else but two chairs, paper, No. 2 pencils, and erasers, she spent a concentrated hour with each person, trying her best to capture the essence of each face.

In every case, the experience was quiet: no one spoke and, aside from an occasional cough or shuffle of chair legs, the hour passed in silence. Some people found it

difficult to keep still as they sat, others fell asleep. Some discovered a piece of art in the gallery to focus on, saying afterward that they'd never breeze through a museum or art opening again. Others, like Annette Naegel, focused on inward expression.

“Just imagine one hundred people sharing an hour of silence over these winter months,” Naegel says. “This project has woven an intention of quiet—in slowing down, being with our bodies, reflecting and remembering a way to be present.”

The project is, at its core, philanthropic. Neither Hayes nor the gallery makes money from the drawings that sell. Rather, the money goes to local causes, ones chosen by each “sitter.” That has been one of the more surprising elements of the undertaking for Hayes: getting to know what matters most to people living in her community.

“I've learned about where their passions lie,” Hayes says. “Women's issues, food security, adoption of animals, nature. We're lucky to be in such a compassionate place.”

Scott Sell is a writer and filmmaker living in Rockland. His work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Island Journal.



Polly Saltonstall sits for her portrait. Photo by Scott Sell.