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2024

FIRST-PLACE WINNER

Tanja Gant

A self-portrait turns a fleeting moment into a study of mystery and identity. **BY DOREEN MANNING**

When you check out the portfolio of artist Tanja Gant, you can't help but feel as though you're witnessing a cinematic experience. Her body of work, featuring a mix of stunningly precise colored pencil, graphite and charcoal, focuses on portraits and intimate studies of hands, faces and still life—all seemingly captured in unguarded moments, like stills from a documentary.

Gant's *Self Portrait* was inspired by a scene in a New York City restaurant, captured through the lens of her husband's phone camera. Although it took a few years to decide how she wished to portray herself in the finished drawing, she says the pose and lighting happened spontaneously. It wasn't until she began to draw the scene that she removed all saturation and boosted the contrast, leaving the background plain and dark.

"The teacup covering my mouth speaks to the fact that I'd rather be an observer," Gant explains, "while the two Chinese characters describe who I am. They're 'thunder' [left] and 'peace' [right]. Simplicity and drama, especially, were important. That's why I kept the composition simple and monochrome, with a touch of red."

DRAWING STUDY

Gant was born and raised in Bosnia and Herzegovina, formerly part of Yugoslavia, and—due to what she calls "a set of very fortunate circumstances,"—ended up in East Texas after moving countless times over the last 27 years.

Drawing has been a part of the artist's life for as long as she can remember. In her early childhood, doodles of cartoon characters and comic book heroes adorned every surface she could access with a pencil. A shift came in fifth grade, however, with a class assignment to draw Yugoslavia's late president, Josip Broz. It was then Gant realized she could truly capture a person's likeness, something she had never attempted before. "From then on, I focused on portraits," she says. "The only thing that remained constant was my primary medium: pencil."

Throughout her high school years, Gant considered attending the Academy of Fine Arts, in Sarajevo but, ultimately, decided that obtaining a degree in English would provide more career opportunities. "My English studies lasted until the Bosnian War broke out in 1992—a war that made me a refugee in my own country," she says. "Still, I drew. After the war, I got a job as a translator with an international organization. A few years later, I met my husband."

The couple moved to the United States in 1999, eventually settling in Texas. Only after resigning from her office job in 2010, however, was Gant able to dedicate herself to her art full time.

FOR THE LOVE OF PORTRAITURE

Completely self-taught, Gant's love for portraiture has grown throughout the years. "In each person I see a story; whether happy or sad, each is a story worth telling," she says.



Born in Bosnia, in 1972, Tanja Gant is a contemporary, realist portrait artist who currently resides in Texas. Since becoming a full-time artist in 2010, she has won numerous awards in regional, national and international competitions, and her work has been exhibited in shows across the country. She has been featured in several renowned fine art publications, including *Southwest Art*, *Artists Magazine* and several editions of *Strokes of Genius*. Gant's drawings hang in the permanent collections of the Art Renewal Center and the European Museum of Contemporary Art, in Barcelona, as well as private collections around the world.

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SELF PORTRAIT
(charcoal on paper, 12x12)



The artist's process is slow and deliberate. She doesn't use blending tools like stumps, brushes, sponges or even her fingers. Instead, she focuses intently on small sections at a time, such as hair, background or hands—finishing as much as possible before she moves on. "I build up the values by applying as many light layers of pencil as it takes," she explains. "Depending on the lightness and difficulty of the section I'm working on, it can take anywhere between three and six layers, or more."

For the darkest sections that don't require layering, a simple burnishing with as few layers of the softest grade of charcoal pencil will do. Gant's secret to rendering different surfaces convincingly is to use different pressures and strokes, making values pop and transitions smooth (or not).

A big area of growth since the artist's doodle days has been the ability to truly *see* her own work—to not only catch her mistakes, but hone the skills to fix them. "I'd like to believe I'm able to do that but I still make monumental mistakes that no amount of observation or skill can fix," she says. "And hair still remains my least favorite thing to draw. It's my biggest nemesis."

To create her prizewinning self-portrait, Gant transferred her reference photo onto Koh-I-Noor bristol vellum paper using a grid-and-metric system, working from light to dark with a mix of graphite, charcoal and colored pencil. "The surface turned out to be perfect for a drawing this size, along with Cretacolor Nero charcoal pencils, with just enough tooth to hold the pigment and get the darks I wanted," she says. "Nero charcoal pencils come in grades ranging from extra-soft to extra-hard, but I use only the hard, medium and extra-soft grades."

UNINTENTIONAL SUBVERSION

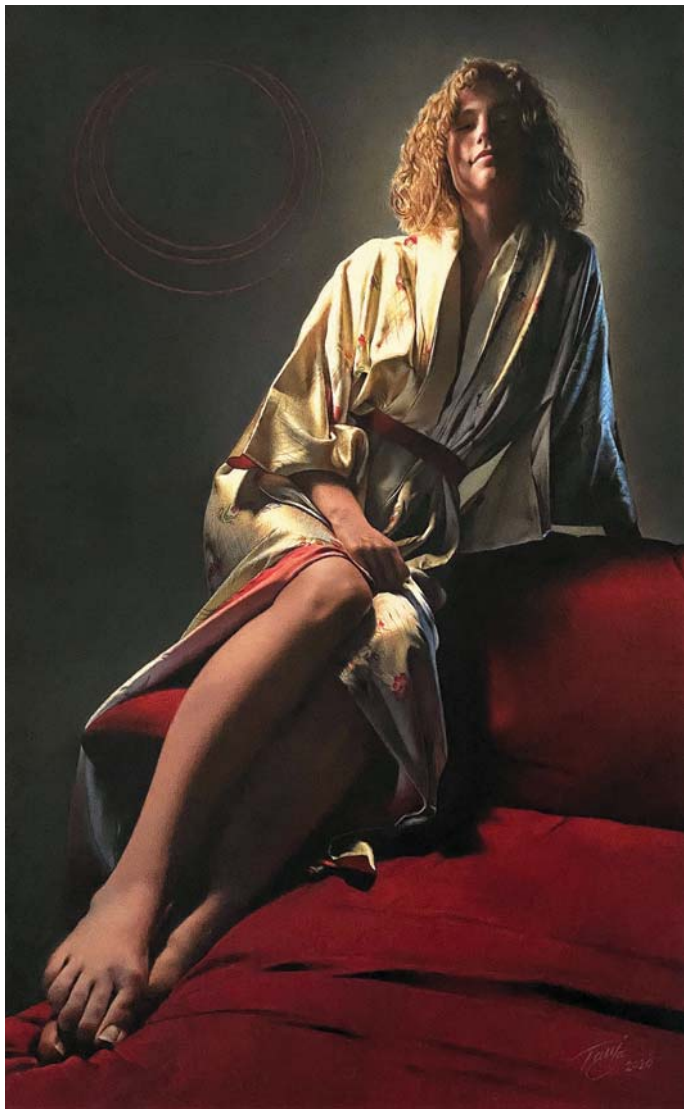
Strokes of Genius 18 Juror of Awards Annie Murphy Robinson was struck by the technique on display in the work. "*Self-Portrait* takes the traditional concept of the genre and brilliantly subverts it, obstructing the lower half of the face while somehow offering an even deeper insight into the sitter," says Robinson. "Beyond being technically masterful, this piece is both inviting and questioning. The pattern of the shirt juxtaposed with the characters on the bowl pulls the composition together visually, while the subtle touch of red lettering guides the eye straight back to the artist's gaze."

Gant notes that the juror's interpretation of her self-portrait as a "subversion of the traditional concept" is spot on. "The subversion part was unintentional but, comparing it to other self-portraits—which reveal as much of the artist as possible—my drawing indeed stands out," says the artist. "I'd rather include words in a portrait of me than the whole me. Words add a different dimension to a piece of art. It's a whole different world."

Gant's advice to those struggling with any type of drawing media is to simply slow down. "First, think about what you want to say. Then figure out how to say it," she says. "You owe it to yourself. Your voice needs to be heard."

Massachusetts-based writer Doreen Manning is a regular contributor to the Artists Network group of magazines.





CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE

GOOD SHEPHERD (colored pencil on paper, 26x21)

UP IN THE AIR—TURBULENCE (colored pencil on paper, 21x15)

MOON SHINE (colored pencil on paper, 30x19)

THE FIRST TIME I MET YOU (colored pencil on paper, 15x21)

