

Sigmund Abeles: Artist Statement

Being an only child raised by an only parent, my Mom, who ran a small rooming house on the coast of South Carolina, set the stage for my life-long, obsessive curiosity about both the look and the psychology of people, their faces and their bodies. This upbringing also geared me to accept and often crave lots of time alone, a necessity for the artist's working life.

There was no art taught in my public school, but I discovered the compelling power of art thanks to in-depth articles about artists in *Life* magazine. The first centerfold in my life was the entire Sistine Ceiling that I taped above my bed.

Soon afterward, I taught myself to draw by going to the nearby Brookgreen Gardens in Murrells Inlet, which was filled with anatomically correct sculptures and models that never needed a break. How amazing it was to have this magical place a half-hour drive away. It is today, still, the largest outdoor collection of figurative art in the world. I am, indeed, proud to have a life-sized bronze, standing girl (*Käthe, Age Nine*, 1968) in its permanent collection, now.

As a teenager, having jobs at both riding stables and on the beach renting floats, umbrellas and chairs, I filled sketchbooks with bathing-suited bodies and some horses as well. Although I adore being in nature, especially riding in the landscape, it never compels me to attempt to capture its constant changeability.

Drawing informs and is the backbone of everything in my art. I once met a sign painter who had studied in an art school, and he advised me to "make at least five drawings each day, and, in five years, you can call yourself an artist." It's hard to find better advice. I still fill sketchbooks now, often late at night, from live television. I like to draw Charlie Rose's eminent guests.

Getting Mom to allow me to study art as a profession was the "battle royal" of my lifetime. I had to be tested for ulcers in high school as a result. For a few years, I was actually enrolled in Pre-Med at the University of South Carolina to appease her.

I never had a teacher whose art I wanted to emulate but chose my art ancestors according to my passion for their work. Early on, I decided that Käthe Kollwitz was my artistic grandmother and had photos of her as well as her work throughout my home. Lotte Jacobi, a world renowned photographer most famous for her Einstein photos and a refugee from Nazi Germany, lived in New Hampshire, and we became friends after jurying an art exhibition together. She had taken photos of Käthe Kollwitz and has sent two signed copies of them to me over time. I also have a few original prints by Kollwitz to live with, study and enjoy daily.

It is a personal loss as well as a loss to the world of art that the greatest painter working from life in the 20th and 21st centuries has died. Work by him has stopped. To my eye and mind, Lucian Freud was the greatest painter working, on a par with Van Gogh and Rembrandt. Instead of making me want to give up and quit, his intense work drives me to keep trying for my own corner of honesty.

In truth, my training was not at all academic. I was not trained in schools like the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts or the Boston Museum School. I had to teach myself "realism." Thus, over my thirty years of teaching, I have felt a strong need to impart to my students intense observation and honest expression of the model.

As time passes, I appreciate having had wonderful students that are still very much in my life. Considering the high dropout rate of those who study art, I have a strong, good number of "lifers" that I am extremely proud of and consider good friends and fellow artists.

I often wonder who taught Americans to respond universally with "What media?" when learning that one is a visual artist. My response is to say, "If I told you oil painting or sculpture or etching, you still would not have any inkling about my work. My art is about human beings and animals." Then the response is, "Oh, you are a portrait painter?" To which I answer, "No, at least not commissioned portraits; guess I am too honest. I need my subjects to have eyes that return my gaze. For me to desire to draw, paint or etch them, I need to capture the essence of them looking back at me."

Very recently, I came across the dictum of the American poetesse Chase Twitchell, who wrote, "Tell the truth. No decoration. Remember death." I was stunned by how neatly it fit me, too. Those three short statements lasso my lifetime of image-making coupled with my innate nature. I would only need to add, "Trust intuition and take chances."

Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Self-Portrait in Cowboy Hat, AZ

mixed media
1999

It was after the breakup of my last marriage that my early teenage son, Max, decided he wanted to paint. When Max does something, it is with full steam ahead. He and I took a trip to Spain together, and he began doing landscapes in the streets. Our second painting journey was to New Mexico, to the little town where Georgia O'Keefe lived and worked, Abiquiu. We rented a pickup truck and assembled and tore down our setups with the early afternoon thunder and lightning storms. At night, we painted self-portraits in our motel room. While I was working on this one, which was left unfinished, I was watching Max's self-portrait. It was reminding me of a Lucian Freud, when bam...he wiped it out! Born a perfectionist, what was stunning to me just did not meet his standard. I miss his work, but he probably does not.

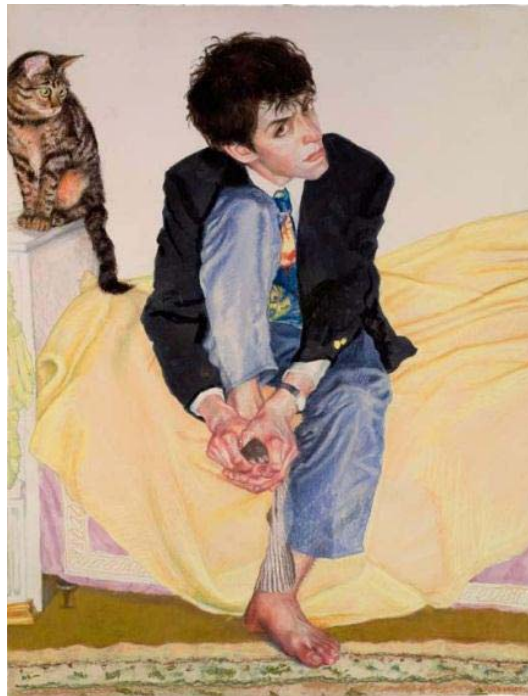


Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

My Son Max and His Cat Orville

pastel on paper
2006

This was conceived of while the two of us were in Brittany, France back in the summer of 1999. I had been awarded a grant to work for six weeks at the *Chateau Rochforte en Terre* through the Maryland Art Institute. The landscape was never my focus, but it was for my son Max, who was making *plein air* paintings in Central Park. He was still in high school at the time. We were given the chateau's master suite to the chagrin of another visiting artist, and that daybed that Max is sitting on to pull up his socks was one of the quality furnishings in our digs. There are two closely related pastels of the same subject. Each depicts a different one of his pair of Bengal cats, Orville and Wilbur, both flyers. Being a slow worker, I added the cats once we returned to the states. Max actually made some of the very strongest paintings of all those working there. I'm so proud of him.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Heads or Tails

pastel on paper
2011

This large, intense lady is actually a painter whose studio I visited in St. Maarten while on a vacation with companion Nora Lavori. My image derived from snapshots of her when we parted. I had not initially seen the coin grasped in her hand, but it gave me the title for the pastel portrait. The banyan tree and hunting cat were incorporated during the process of developing the composition. I stayed focused on her confrontational stance.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

*Thomas Williams,
Gullah Walking Stick Carver*

pastel on handmade paper
2010 – 2012

Thomas Williams is, in my mind, a local craftsman who is a creative genius. I first saw one of his sticks, a cooter, in the collection of Fred Newby, a Pawley's Island attorney, who is husband to Cheryl Newby, my local art dealer. I was thunderstruck and asked to meet him. I ended up buying and commissioning a number of unique sticks from him, namely one of my deceased German shepherd, Kaethe, and my deceased horse, Sayida.

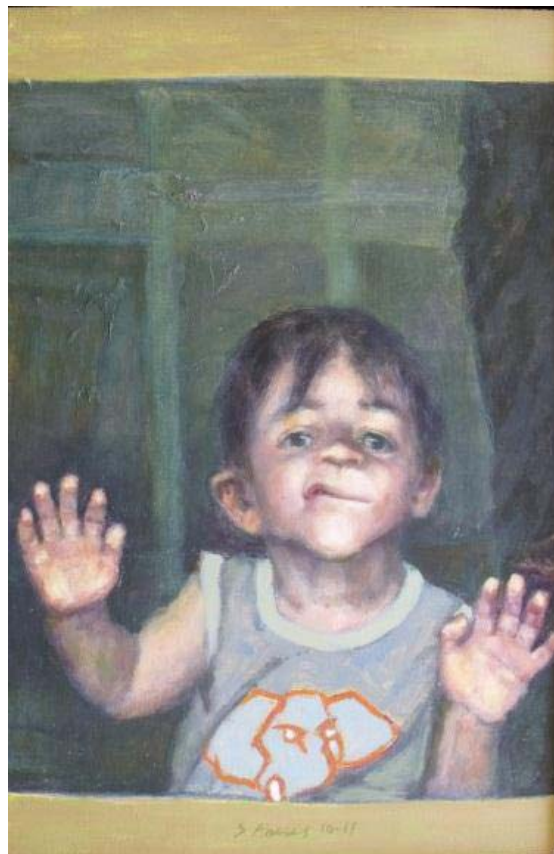


Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

*The Last Time I Saw My Dad,
Brooklyn, NY 1936*

oil on panel
2011

I have no memory of my father, not one. I guess that is not so unusual, since I was only two-and-a-half when Mom ran away from him with me, and we landed far from Brooklyn in Myrtle Beach. I go around these days taking a lot of snapshots of what catches my eye. I do still keep sketchbooks, but this wealth of photo images feeds my art. I came to realize this kid with his face smushed against a screen door beside his mom was indeed my story – watching my dad walk away for the last time.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Look Mare, No Mom

oil on panel
2007 – 2009

Look Mare, No Mom is, to my mind, my most "Myrtle Beach" painting. When else did I tackle such a sky, the sea and the sand? Riding/racing on the beach, standing up on my horse and doing so much "horsing around," were my crazy passions and for sure my mother's biggest fear, so it was all done behind her back.

So, imagine my excitement when one rare day while visiting the Franklin G. Burroughs-Simeon B. Chapin Art Museum in Myrtle Beach, my hometown, I caught out of the corner of my eye a young man standing up on a horse. I bolted out of the museum, caught up with him, puffing, and told him I used to do just that when I was his age. I took some quick photos and later that day showed them to my poet pal, Tom Johnson, also visiting down there, who immediately proclaimed: "Sig, that is going to be one of your very best paintings." I believe it is.



Figuratively Speaking
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Myrtle Beach Gullah Bartender

oil on panel
2010 – 2011

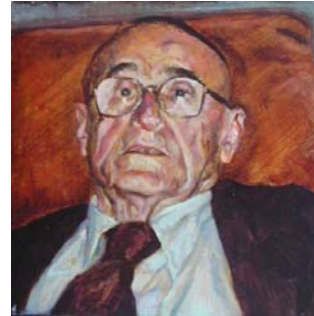
This was a man I met while having a drink with my grade school and high school classmate and friend, the renowned South Carolina author and professor, Charles Joyner. I was struck by the vividness of this man and how it was amplified by his canary yellow sport coat. I inquired if, indeed, he might be Gullah, and he answered in the positive. I worked from photos I took of him.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Cousin Vilmos, Survivor

oil on panel
1998



If Truman Moore were my youthful father-figure and mentor, then this man, Vilmos Abeles, became a most loved and valued father-figure in my adult life and a source of great pride and knowledge of the paternal side of my family. He was my father's first cousin, and we only met for the first time when I was 60 and he 90. I had grown curious of just who my paternal family was. All Mom told me was that my father was born in Hungary, and Hungarians eat a lot of paprika. Asking around, a Hasidic cousin I knew said:

*The family historian is a cousin named Vilmos who now lives in Brooklyn.
Here's the phone number. Give him a call. He will give you an earful.*

I did call, and Vilmos did know just who I was. We had attended two funerals together. One was my father's, but no one introduced us. I learned that Vilmos had been forced into slave labor twice in Hungary under the Hungarian fascists and Nazis and had somehow escaped when the war was almost done to find that his parents' siblings - indeed at least 40 Abeles family members - were cattle trained to the death camps and gassed/murdered. My Hungarian family has records going back over 300 years, where we had major grain businesses and many vast properties confiscated by the fascists. After World War II, Vilmos had to live mostly precariously under the Communists until his successful escape to America with his wife and two small children in 1956. By great luck, he won the New York State Lottery in 1958, not that that could compensate for the hell on earth he experienced.

For the next three years of his life, Vilmos looked forward to my visits, and I have drawings, paintings and manuscripts of his amazing exploits to survive against all odds. Not only do I deeply know my Abeles roots now, but I was given love, respect and connections from this strong yet compassionate relative who has shaped my later years by filling the blank gaps in my paternal family's history.

Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

My Girls: Horse Sayida, Dog Kaetha

pastel on paper
2004 – 2005

Talk about unconditional love 24/7. These two four-legged beasts, these two beauties, craved my attention and quality time with me, as much as they could get – so, so willing. Kaethe, my shepherd, lived 11 ½ years, and I had Sayida, a rescue from a distraught, divorced student, for nine thrilling years of fast, spirited riding and just horsing around. Lord, I miss them both. Together...well, a shepherd instinctively wants to herd, and a full-of-herself Arab mare wants no part of that. I feared a kick to Kaethe's head, but it never occurred – just pinned-eared warnings.

The great story took place at dusk as I was going down to the front field to bring my horse up for supper and for the night. Just out of nowhere, she reared and bolted, pulling her lead rope out of my unexpected hand. Mares! I ran in the house to call the police and then jumped into my car...in less than a quarter mile away, I spotted them. Here came Kaethe with the lead line firmly in her teeth, leading home a willing, many-times-her-size Sayida rather happily. Talking about my girls!



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Nora with Hand Grasping Chin/Ring

oil on panel
2005

Nora Lavori, the lady love of my life, and I met at the only open studio I ever held in my New York City studio on Pearl Harbor Day, which was, as we both recall, a bitter cold day. My studio neighbor was her friend, hence the invite. The empathy witnessed within my art, apparently, grabbed her before I might have. I was struck by a dream-like, beautiful Italian-American woman wrapped in a lush brown coat with great, curly hair, a walking work of art to my eyes. We have been an item for 13 wonderful years since, traveling together, dating and sharing. The fact that Nora is an attorney and business woman, not another artist, is definitely a positive factor in our getting along so well. She has enhanced my existence beyond any words.

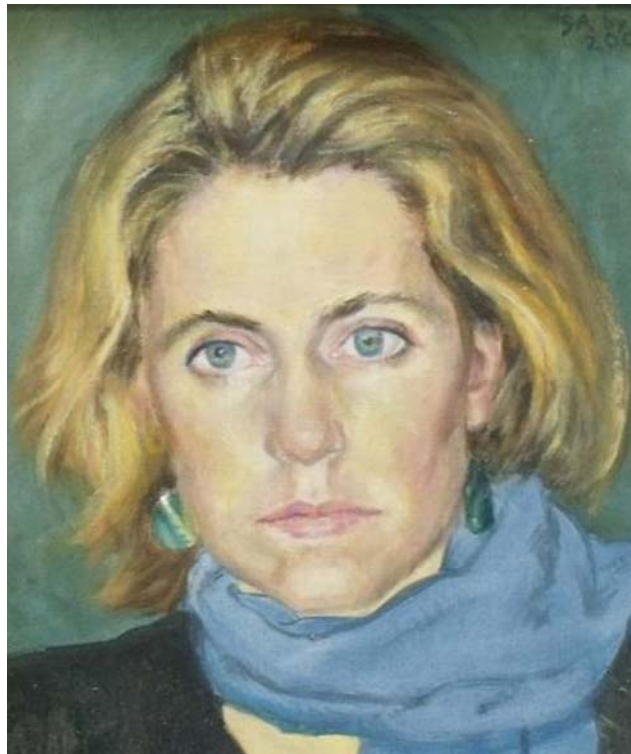


Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Shanna in Blue Scarf

oil on panel
2005

Shoshanna is a deep, clear-headed person and a very devoted and connected daughter. Both her parents are blessed by her outstanding character and personality. She had a crew scholarship to Northeastern and was a serious and talented horseback rider. Her initial career was in zoos, working in both Boston and New York City through 9/11. Later, she co-authored the *catalog raisonné* of the late American painter Thomas Dewing with scholar Susan Hobbes. She has also tackled the big job of archiving and organizing my life's work as well as my art collection. What a job! What sweet patience she shows me. I am a lucky dad, artist and man. This is a direct eye contact, frontal face painting of this lovely soul.

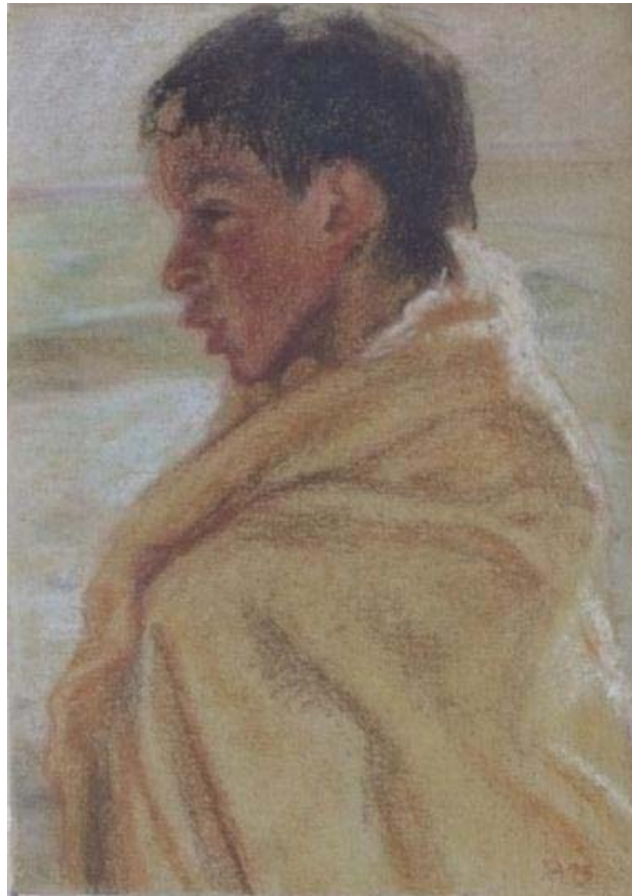


Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Max Shivering on a New England Beach

pastel on pastel cloth mounted on board
1993

I know my son Max tires of hearing about his very early birth; however, he was a very skinny kid growing up in the Northeast, where almost all water and surrounding air was cold. So, he often got shivery and bluish at the shore and in pools. Here is such a moment. I have to think of the great Spanish painter, Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923), with his memorable masterpieces of kids in the surf. Max would have been more comfortable in warm Spanish waters.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Her Voice Reaches to Heaven

oil on panel
2010

I was so moved by the chorus of a Gullah gospel group that performed at the Gullah Community Day at the Franklin G. Burroughs-Simeon B. Chapin Art Museum a few years ago, and then and there, I set myself to the task of making my silent art feel like there is singing. Two favorite artists of mine, Thomas Eakins and Edgar Degas, made magical paintings of singing figures that are permanently framed in my brain. I also enjoyed the rhythm of the play of colorful curved forms against the neutral grey ground.

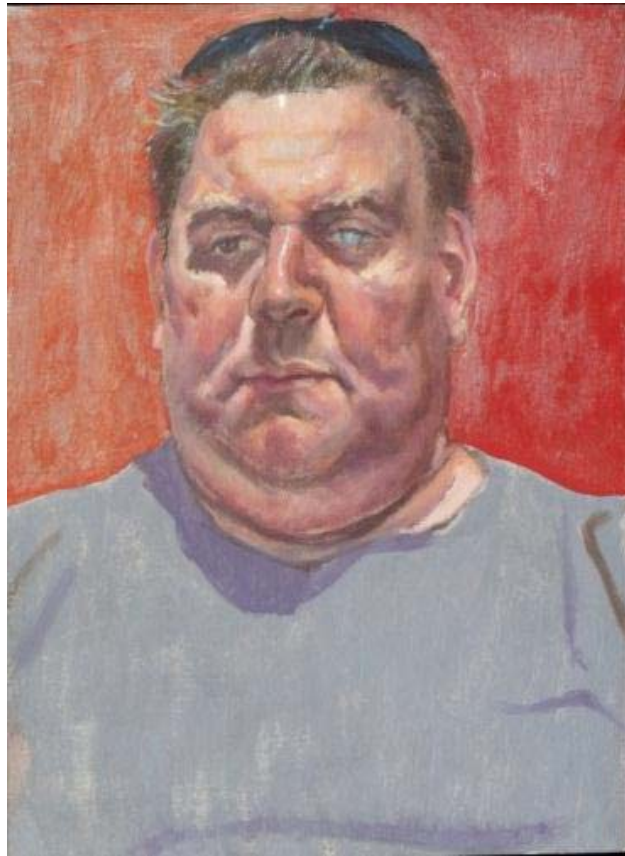


Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

My Son David, Turns a Blind Eye

oil on panel
2008

My older son, David Paul, has a very powerful presence. Sadly, he lost his left eye in a fireworks accident. This is a one shot, one sitting, straight-on portrait sketch unabashedly showing his blind eye, which triggers the memory of a great Blue Period Picasso painting of a blind-in-one-eye woman. Some of us artists have all of art history vividly embedded within our visual memories.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Nuzzling Pair

oil on panel
2010

I like to say that this painting is my most romantic work, for sure, of animals. I was at a horse rescue farm in upstate New York, where I volunteered, when this pair met – mare and stallion in the initial process known as “teasing the mare.” The work is based on a quick snapshot. I feel I should address the subject again in both pastel and an etching/drypoint.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

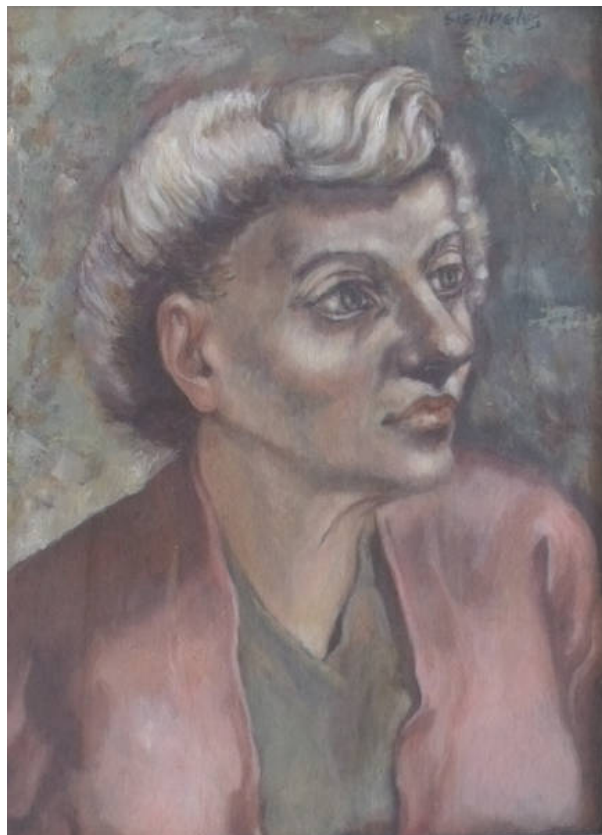
Artist's Mother with Thoughts of Picasso

oil on canvas board
1954

Mom was dead set against me trying to make a career in art.

*All I know is that artists starve, and there is no reason for you to starve.
Choose something you can make a living from, and keep art as a hobby.*

This was her mantra; however, she did agree to sit for me, because the rooming house business, especially in the off season back then, had a lot of down time. This middle-aged mom's visage sprung from my admiration of Picasso's classical figures.

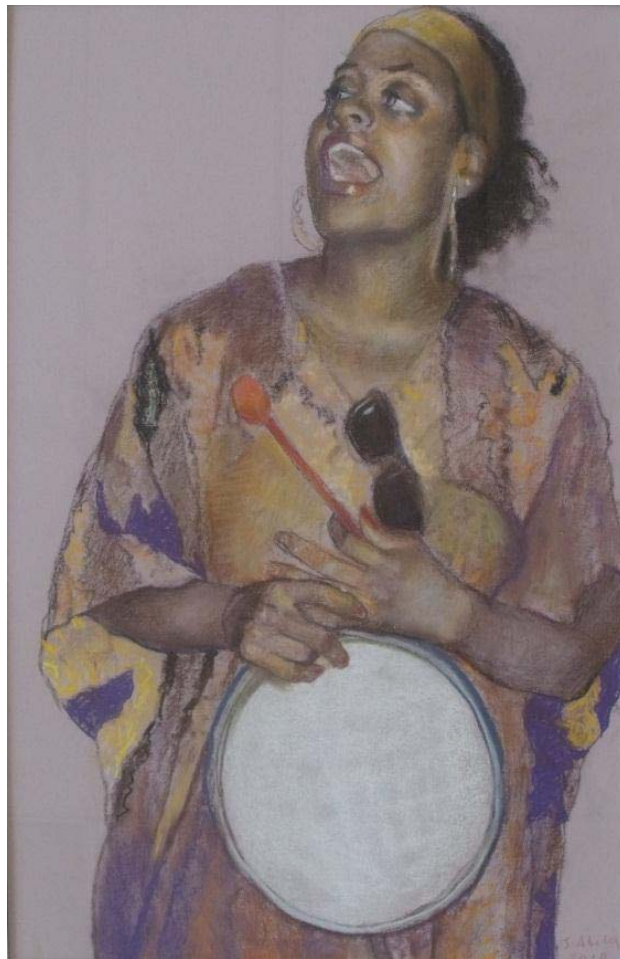


Figuratively Speaking
The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Gospel Gullah Singer with Tambourine

pastel on paper
2010

What a lovely, youthful contrast to the other older, larger singer. Again, a picture composed of arching curves. I like the bounce from the open mouth down to the white circle of the tambourine, with the hanging glass in between. The color harmonies worked out in this image, I feel.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Truman Moore, Builder - Sculptor, the Measure of a True Man

pastel on paper
2009

From the Collection of Cathy Nance



Truman Moore, my youthful father-figure, truly shaped my life. Initially, he trained to be a painter at The Chicago Art Institute and alas, finding he could not make a living as a fine artist, moved to Myrtle Beach and joined his brother in the highest level construction firm in town. Truman Sr. had a son, also named Truman, who was one of my best friends. Truman Jr. became a noted photographer with a successful career in New York City.

The Moores' modest home was about six blocks away and closer to the sea than Mom's rooming house. Mr. Truman treated both of us as serious visual artists when we were in high school.

Two big things intensified our commitment to art. The older Moore suffered a medical issue and then decided to build himself the "ideal" studio. Amassing books on artist studios, he created a small but perfect north-light studio and then built easels, drawing tables, stretchers and frames. It was shy me who ventured to tell him: "Truman, you love wood. Carve. Become a sculptor." He must have realized I was right, and he tackled sculpture with great passion and skill until his early death from cancer. I depicted Truman with the *bas-relief* that symbolized my family. I based my depiction of him on wonderful photographs by his son. Truman was the master builder for two unique studio/homes of Gerard Tempest. I was Mr. Tempest's apprentice for my last two years of high school. Mr. Truman always gave me great confidence, urging me to devote myself to art, which was a departure from the pressure from my mother to keep it as my "hobby."

Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Classical Rene

pastel on mauve-brown paper
2000

From the Collection of Coastal Carolina University
Rebecca Randall Bryan Art Gallery

Rene Augusta is an actor who has been in several movies and off-Broadway plays; and to make a living, she worked as an artist model. Growing up in the Jim Crow South and living a long spell in very white New Hampshire, I welcomed being able to work with African-Americans. I consider being an artist a license to stare, and one needs to stare to get the colors correct, to capture forms other than my own. Rene appears in many of my works from the mid '90s, and this work has a nobility and beauty not often reached. It was done in a single session of about three hours of staring hard.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Compounding Reflections, Self Portrait with Wife, Anne

oil on gessoed birch plywood
1989

From the Collection of Coastal Carolina University
Rebecca Randall Bryan Art Gallery

My portrait of a marriage...this little oil, hopefully, can be read on a number of levels. Ideally, each partner in a marriage should have equal billing, even if, at times, one attempts to jockey out ahead of the other. I enjoyed painting the gold fish and the reflections and see the little panel painting as a documentary of an intense period in my life.



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

Aunt Rose with Long Stemmed Rose

oil on panel
2002

From the Collection of Coastal Carolina University
Rebecca Randall Bryan Art Gallery

Mom came to the South Carolina coast mainly because of the Great Depression, the failure of her marriage and the fact that her two brothers and sister had found their way to Horry County and formed successful businesses, Banner Bros. in Conway and Herzberg's Liquors in Myrtle Beach. My Aunt Rose Banner was a classy and beautiful lady from whom I learned to appreciate feminine beauty. She had the only dog in our family (until I got mine), and I was always nuts for dogs. As a young woman, Rose won a beauty contest in Georgia, perhaps then a first for a Jewish woman. I named my son Max for my Uncle Max Banner, Aunt Rose's husband. Eventually, Rose and Max moved to Florida, where Max passed away. Rose lived on well into her 90s. I feel I captured a great deal of my Aunt Rose with this portrait, but her family feels I was too blunt. Ah, the very problematic nature of the drawn or painted portrait!



Figuratively Speaking The Art of Sigmund Abeles

