

Portraitist and Patron: Meeting in the Middle

By PETER TRIPPI



This is the story of a business relationship that has, over 15 years, blossomed into a friendship centered on both art and ideas. The fact that it has happened at all reminds us of art's potential to bring people together, no matter how different their lives may be.

The New York City painter Mikel Glass (b. 1962) grew up near Boston, earned his BA at Pomona College in southern California, and then his MFA at the New York Academy of Art. Although trained in classical realism, Glass has attracted national attention for turning his meticulous technique to tough, occasionally disturbing images of drag queens, street people, mangled dolls, decaying still lifes, and other non-traditional motifs.

Running parallel to this body of work is Glass's thriving practice in portraiture, represented most forcefully by 12 portraits of members of the family of Marc and Cathy Lasry. Based in New York City and suburban Connecticut, Marc Lasry heads Avenue Capital and has, with his wife, become well known as a generous supporter of the Democratic party. The couple are very close with their three daughters and two sons, the oldest of whom is now 24, and so it is no surprise that they have underwritten Glass's successful campaign to convey their children's ever-changing appearances and personalities.

LOOKING BACKWARD, AND FORWARD

Marc Lasry's parents did not collect art, while Cathy's collected modern artworks that somehow never captured her imagination. Together the couple has acquired historical canvases pleasing to the eye and traditional in theme. Among the standouts are several portraits by John Singer Sargent, a group of figures by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, and canvases by Fantin-Latour, Degas, Monet, and Renoir. Cathy is especially interested in the female Impressionist painters and thus owns good examples by Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, and others. Their view of 19th-century art reaches beyond fashionability to encompass a domestic genre scene by the Hungarian master Mihály Munkácsy and canvases by the most successful American inheritors of European academism, the illustrators Norman Rockwell and J.C. Leyendecker.

THE LASRY FAMILY

1999, OIL ON CANVAS, 82 x 62 IN.





SAMANTHA LASRY
1999, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 20 IN.

Noticeably absent from the Lasry collection are contemporary pictures, and indeed Marc holds an outspokenly “emperor’s new clothes” view of the contemporary art market’s ongoing excesses. It is surprising, therefore, to spot in the Lasrys’ home a typically edgy portrait by Alice Neel (1900–1984), the American modernist who made her sitters look terrible yet deftly conveyed their inner psychological states. Although Cathy Lasry cannot fully explain why she had to buy this painting, its presence hints at why Glass’s campaign to record her family has kept all parties intrigued for 15 years.

Glass met the Lasrys during a party at their home in 1995, when his wife, the cellist Caryl Paisner, worked briefly for Marc’s firm. There he spotted two chairs he had once painted while freelancing for Ralph Lauren Polo, and naturally Cathy Lasry was pleased to learn more about her furniture’s history. Soon the Lasrys began negotiating with Glass to paint a portrait of their entire family, including Marc’s father. Over the next few months, Glass advocated for a large, ambitious composition, while the Lasrys preferred something more modest in scale and content. While this dialogue continued, Cathy and Glass visited museums together, paying particular attention to Sargent’s portraits. Eventually Glass showed the Lasrys a reproduction of Sargent’s compositionally complex *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Transfixed, everyone agreed that Glass should channel the broody yet affectionate spirit of this famous masterwork.

As promised, Glass’s Lasry portraits sustain the Boit daughters’ sense of informality, as well as the psychological insights that child sitters make available more readily than adults do. (See the November/December 2009 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur* for more on this aspect of child portraiture.) In Glass’s first picture of the entire family, each generation occupies its own space: Marc’s father (who died shortly thereafter) stands in the distance, the couple sits at far left, and the children cascade down the staircase from the womb-like darkness above. Glass organized the composition to reflect the passage of time, as people move from youth



ALEXANDER LASRY
2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 20 x 38 IN.



ZACHARY LASRY
2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 32 X 24 IN.



SOPHIE LASRY
2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 36 IN.

to middle age and finally “into the light” seen in the distance here.

There was no original plan for Glass to carry on painting all of the Lasrys’ children. Rather, this phase began when their eldest, Samantha, posed for one of Glass’s generic figure paintings; her parents loved the result, bought it, and decided to keep going. At first, Glass recalls, he had *carte blanche* to paint as he pleased. Over time he began sharing his aesthetic decisionmaking with Marc, but gradually realized that this was problematic: Would a surgeon allow his patient to decide how the scalpel should be used during the operation? (Glass jokes that, in Marc’s case, the answer would be “yes.”) This dynamic continued until last year when, frustrated that the compositions were becoming compromised,



SOPHIE LASRY
2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 28 X 50 IN.



ALEXANDER AND ZACHARY LASRY
2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 X 29 IN.



EMMA LASRY
2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 72 X 42 IN.

Glass presented his portrait of Emma — one that Marc adored, yet would never have approved in advance. Artist and patron thus made a deal: Create another portrait that Marc would love (this became *Alexander and Zachary*), then another of the sons as wild as Glass could imagine (still in development.)

This situation speaks to the conflict inherent in commissions, where taste comes into play and success is measured differently by each party. Though he understands that he must make flattering likenesses the Lasrys can enjoy, Glass also wants to make art. This often involves imbuing the work with attributes that convey narrative, and sometimes exceeding expectations of size and scope in order to convey a message.

This ongoing conflict came to a head this July in Glass's new portrait of Cathy, which he refused to show the Lasrys until it was completed. This, he says, is "on a whole different plane from any portrait I've made before for the Lasrys. It brings Sargent's society portraiture up to date, offering grandeur and a strong narrative element that embodies everything I need to say about the synergy of my longstanding partnership with Cathy." (Interestingly, Marc maintains that he will not sit for his own portrait.)

STRIKING A BALANCE

All creative processes entail a certain degree of juggling, and Glass's campaign features several characteristic tensions. First, he relishes his "symbiotic" relationship with the Lasrys: "They keep me rooted and connected to traditional art, while



EMMA LASRY
2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 32 X 25 IN.



I have introduced them to contemporary ideas about art that ensure their portraits do not look old-fashioned.” In his own mind, Glass constantly seeks “a balance between sound craftsmanship and psychic exploration, which adheres to no rules. Earlier in my career, I tried to embrace my initial reaction to the people I painted. When, for example, I learned that my favorite model had been diagnosed with AIDS, my reaction was to depict him covered with a skin of olive-studded luncheon meats. I can’t control my thoughts — only my reactions to them. The Lasrys have no appetite for the indulgent flights of psychic exploration that I exhibit at commercial galleries. In fact, Cathy has expressed her fear that I might depict her kids in some bizarre fashion. But the Lasrys and I have established a relationship of mutual trust that allows them to remain relatively hands-off while I find a balance that can please us all — a flattering likeness in a dynamic composition. Over time I have been able to put more of my own vision into their portraits.”

Marc Lasry concurs: “Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but I admire someone who can make a painting look as detailed as a photograph, and then go beyond to make it artistic, to bring it to a higher level. Mikel is that rare talent who can also focus on his clients’ needs. I want what I want, he tells me where he needs to go as an artist, and I trust him to do the right thing.”

This leads naturally to the crucial issue of how portraiture can transcend the specific or anecdotal. “My objective always,” Glass says, “is to make a portrait that would interest someone who does not know the sitter: It should work as a painting that just happens to depict a particular person. Moreover, the work should not only explore the sitter’s psyche, but also the *zeitgeist* around them: It can be a time capsule that shows viewers something about the culture of its era.”

A tall order perhaps, but Glass’s portraits of the Lasry family are clearly achieving these goals. Stay tuned for what comes next. ■

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

CATHY LASRY
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 72 x 42 IN.