



"Portrait of a Pleasure Activist"

ALICE BONVICINI (November 01, 2010)



Betsy Ashton immortalizes Fred Plotkin's joie de vivre on canvas

Having your portrait painted must be quite exciting. We decided to pay a visit to [Fred Plotkin](#) [2], the New Yorker who pours his passion for Italy into books about opera, classical music, food, wine and culture, to discover just how exciting it is. At [Illy issimo Authenticity Lounge](#) [3], in the Meatpacking District, [Betsy Ashton](#) [4] was unveiling her latest effort, a picture of Fred Plotkin called "Portrait of a Pleasure Activist." In Fred's words, pleasure activism "is not about hedonism, which can be quite mindless and selfish; it is putting other thoughts out of our head and focusing our senses on what we are perceiving. It is the recognition of the value of things and experiences. One bite of chocolate or one sip of wine, for example, can be immensely rewarding."



Betsy Ashton seems to have developed quite a talent in capturing her sitters' essence. Even as a child she would sketch anything, even getting in trouble in school, but when her teachers would catch her holding a pencil they often would ask to keep those precocious portraits. As a young woman she studied figurative painting at the [National Academy School of Fine Arts](#) [5] and at the [Art Students' League](#) [6] in New York; but those were the years during which the art world gravitated around Rothko and Pollock. Fearing her passion for figurative portraiture would be destined to frustration, she quit painting and started a career in television news. During an assignment to cover a court trial, she became the first and only TV news reporter ever to draw her own courtroom sketches. A spark was lit. In 2006, going through a rough divorce, she was forced to reinvent herself. After meeting the love of her life, she decided that her first passion for painting could not lie dormant any longer. Encouraged by mentor and fellow painter, [Everett Raymond Kinstler](#) [7], she resumed doing portraits. Both as a TV news reporter and as a painter, Betsy always found great pleasure in discovering and uncovering people's character. As a TV reporter she had accomplished that with a camera, now she was finally freezing people's spirit on canvas. "I am drawn to characters with personality," she told us "with charm and adventure, so how could I not be drawn to Fred? He is larger than life!" It was during a dinner, hosted by common friend Marisa Zorogniotti, that Betsy met him. "That night Fred was holding the fort with great stories, I knew right then I had to paint him."

And so one night at [Manducatis](#) [8], the Italian Restaurant in Long Island City, Betsy took the picture that became the model for this portrait. For those who wonder why we see a lovely gulf behind Fred's back it is because the portrait was later set at Golfo Paradiso in Camogli, the small fishing village in the Italian Riviera very dear to Fred. Looking at the painting we have the impression we are also on that terrace, dining at his table, sitting right across from him.

At an event about Fred Plotkin, the attention for food and wine was obviously very high. Smoked salmon napoleons, braised short ribs with grit cakes, and dried figs with prosciutto. The wine was personally picked by Fred, a 2005 Mastro Janni Brunello di Montalcino, and a 2009 Pinot Grigio Verdi. But it wasn't the superb wine to make us see two Fred Plotkins in the room: at Ily issimo Authenticity Lounge, Fred wore the outfit he has in Betsy's canvas. Coincidentally, in the painting he is sipping an Illy coffee, "not an americano despite the big cup," he stressed, "it was a double espresso!"

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