

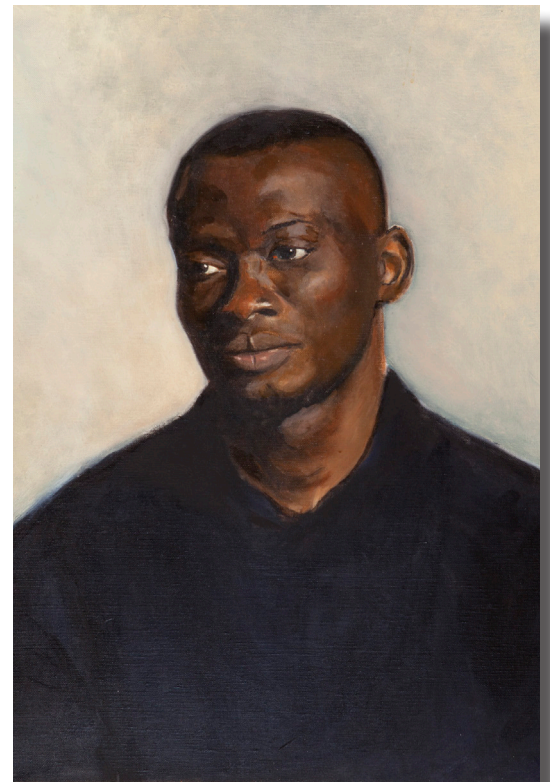
The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Face to Face: Contemporary Portraits*, an exhibition by artist Zoe Bray, at the Courthouse Gallery from October 26, 2021 – February 10, 2022. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Pierette Kulpa, who provided the following essay.

Intimacy and Distance

The paintings and drawings on display at the Carson City Courthouse feature a range of work by portraitist Zoe Bray. Self-described as something of a retrospective, the exhibition showcases works from early in Bray's career, directly following her training at the Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence, Italy, to her most recent work done this year from her home in Reno, NV. In this span of time, from the early 2000s to 2021, we see Bray's approach to portraiture transform, her style and composition transitioning from tighter to more free-flowing as time has passed.

Fluidity and flow are an important part of Bray's working process. She is trained in the sight-size technique in which the canvas is placed next to, but at a slight distance from, the subject. In this method, the painter steps forwards and backwards towards their canvas getting close-up and long-range-views of the sitter and commences to paint. The outcome is a lifelike painting that approximates the size of the person. It is a method that has been used by portrait painters since the sixteenth century. In Bray's work, this moving to and fro from the picture plane works like a metaphor of the intimacy and distance that the portrait itself possesses. As a formally trained anthropologist, Bray both considers the painted portrait the product of lengthy study and collaboration and recognizes the painter's dominant perspective in the way the person is ultimately represented. It is a control wielded with sensitivity and balance. Not only are these portraits the result of many hours spent in the company of her sitters, but Bray frequently works with her subjects to decide on elements of the painting.

One of the earliest portraits exhibited here, *Jules*, in Florence, from 2004, is the product of a friendship cultivated over weeks between Bray and Jules, a caretaker of the monastery outside of Florence where Bray would often go to sketch. Over time, they struck up a friendship, and eventually Bray asked Jules if he would like to sit for a portrait. She did two paintings from that sitting, one that she gave to Jules and the other that is in the show. While conversation with her sitter plays an important part in Bray's practice, moments of silence are equally important facets in relationship building. A lull in conversation and a moment of Jules's contemplation are the actions captured in his portrait in which he has turned to look off into the distance. The painting belies the intimacy and vulnerability that the genre entails.



Jules, in Florence, oil on canvas, 20"x24", 2004.

Jules, in Florence is one of the few portraits in the show where the subject is not looking out at the viewer, and yet, it still captures one of the most important qualities that Bray seeks to highlight in her work, the importance of the eyes in understanding one another. Eye contact is central to Bray's work. In discussing her oeuvre with me, Bray noted that looking someone in the eye allows for dialogue to take place, reinforces a sense of equality between two people, and allows us to move beyond our first impressions and biases. In Bray's more recent work, *Helma and Nathan, in Reno*, Bray endeavored to complicate the eye contact represented by featuring two figures gazing at each other. The painting alludes not to the vulnerability between subject and observer, or subject and painter, but becomes about the bond between the two figures represented. In viewing *Helma and Nathan, in Reno*, we become bystanders to the relationship cultivated between them, an infant and his mother, and while we experience the importance of the shared moment, we are not direct recipients of it.



Marie-Louise Lekumberry, *in Reno*, oil on canvas, 48"x60", 2012.

If the sight-size method acts as a metaphor for the relationship that Bray herself cultivates with her subject, and eyes relate the internal narrative of vulnerability and collaboration, then identity is the third characteristic to reckon with in these portraits. Bray recognizes that identity can be a pliable subject; it can change for an individual, as well as for the spectator. Indeed, two viewers might very well interpret a sitter's identity differently based on their own personal background that they bring to the portrait. In most of Bray's works here, objects, background, and clothing hint at identity. A t-shirt, bare feet, a drawing on the wall, all can be charged with meaning. These elements feature into the viewer's reception. In some of these portraits, Bray's work explores aspects of Basque identity. Take the full-length portrait of Marie-Louise Lekumberry, co-owner of J.T. Basque Bar and Dining Room in Gardnerville, NV. Here the striking color combinations of Marie-Louise's blouse, made up of grey, pink, and crimson are set against a gray wall. The composition is balanced with the warm-brown bookcase on the right and the tawny floor. Marie-Louise stands at a slight angle to the picture plane and looks out at the viewer. At eye level on the left is a framed drawing of her father Jean, a Basque émigré from Ossès, Lower Navarre. Marie-Louise brought the drawing of her father to the sitting for Bray to include in the final portrait as an explicit reference to her Basque heritage.

Artistic identity is also on display here, both in the *Self-portrait with fellow artist Batnativ Hakarmi, in Jerusalem*, and in the portrait of *Joan Arrizabalaga, in Reno*. In the former, we see Bray with an infant strapped to her back, both engage us with their stare. Bray works on a canvas that is positioned perpendicularly to the picture plane, her right hand raised to the edge of the painting. A mirror likely stands in our position and captures the attention of two of the three people here. In the background, another painter works at her easel. This painting plays off of a common theme found in self-portraiture from the sixteenth century onwards: a self-portrait of the artist painting, often positioned in front of a mirror. Another familiar theme from early modern portraiture is the artist surrounded by elements of their craft, which is at play in the portrait *Joan Arrizabalaga, in Reno*. The Nevada-based artist is shown here amongst some of her own artworks. Arrizabalaga's work, which references a Nevadan identity through games, gambling, and casinos, can be seen in the taxidermized bighorn sheep on the wall: it has been given a skin of gaming felt. Both portraits identify the artists with signs of their work or working process.



Self-portrait with Noa and fellow artist Batnativ Hakarmi, in Jerusalem, oil on canvas, 31"x43" 2016.

In the end, for us as spectators, we often come both to know the person we are looking at and find them to be strangers; our interpretations of identity have a limit based on what is represented in the work and our familiarity with the person portrayed. We both let them in and are forced to keep them at a distance, but this juxtaposition of proximity and remoteness is, I think, what makes portraiture so enticing and relatable. It echoes our existential anxiety (do we ever really "see" anyone, let alone ourselves?), and reflects our hardwiring for social bonds.

Portraiture has been practiced for thousands of years. In the early modern period in Europe it grew to become a prominent genre of art. Before the arrival of photography, it was the primary means to represent society's elites. We find portraits of kings, queens, noble women and men, popes, and cardinals, and everyday people. But they are not our peers. Bray's portraits derive a sense of wonder and connection through the vibrancy of the person represented, the slow-act of the artist's knowing the sitter, and our recognition that these are our contemporaries. As the title of the exhibition makes clear, the artist has come face to face over many hours with her subject. The conversation, time, and understanding that develops from that experience has been transmitted to the viewer, and the viewer likewise, brings her own perception to these individuals presented as equals. I would argue that this time and comprehension is palpable in

these portraits, they tempt us to reciprocate those conditions by considering them for several minutes, rather than the 15-30 seconds that we might normally afford paintings in a museum or gallery setting. The invitation is there to let our eye wander over the paintings' smooth surfaces and wonder over their creation and meaning. Spend substantial time in front of any one of these works, and you will start to notice previously unseen details. Maybe it is the bandaged hand of Ron Parraguirre, Associate Chief Justice for the Supreme Court of Nevada, who had recently suffered an injury when he sat for the portrait. Or perhaps it is a piece of jewelry, the artist's signature, or even the apparent effortlessness of Bray's ability to render fabric, flesh, and form. With *Face to Face: Contemporary Portraits*, Bray succeeds in summoning the viewer into her process and collaborations, to hold a conversation with the person represented and ultimately, with ourselves.

Pierette Kulpa, PhD
Mertztown, PA
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Zoe Bray

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