

In Newport, Artists Turn Tables on the Gilded Age

In historic mansions where Sargent and Boldini reigned, a new generation of portraitists unites against the Old Guard for a summer show.

By Meredith Mendelsohn

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NEWPORT, R.I. — When visitors tour Stanford White’s Rosecliff this summer, one of the storied historical mansions where HBO’s “The Gilded Age” is filmed, they will find, among the antique heirlooms, a freshly painted life-size portrait of a woman wearing a casual gray pantsuit, a leopard-patterned fedora, and dark sunglasses.

Those hoping for some Gilded Age fairy dust might be thrown off by the sight of Hope “Happy” Hill van Beuren, a multigenerational Newporter, Campbell Soup heiress and philanthropist, who has taken her rightful place — in an Instagram-ready pose — in the salon near a portrait of her father, Nathaniel Peter Hill, from 1905, and her grandmother, Mrs. Crawford P. Hill, from 1910.

Unlike the conventional society portrait, however, this one wasn’t commissioned by its subject. Painted in a soft photorealist style by Sam McKinniss, who is known for his campy transformations of images he finds on the internet, the work is one of some two dozen portraits by contemporary artists now on view in the exhibition “Pictus Porrectus: Reconsidering the Full-Length Portrait,” which has taken up residence this summer in two of Newport’s celebrated “cottages.”

Several blocks north, at the Isaac Bell House by McKim, Mead & White, are portrait subjects that would never have slipped past the notoriously discriminating Gilded Age social gatekeepers. One is Jenna Gribbon’s hot-pink-nippled painting of her partner and frequent muse, the singer-songwriter Mackenzie Scott (who performs as Torres). “The nude body has become so benign to us. I’m partly trying to re-sensitize viewers to it. To convey that it belongs to a person,” Gribbon said.



Sam McKinniss, “Portrait of Happy van Beuren,” 2022, hangs in Rosecliff, near traditional family portraits. Sam McKinniss



Left, Jenna Gribbon, "Too Big for the Painting," a portrait of her partner and muse Mackenzie Scott, 2022; right, John Currin, "Sunflower," 2021, at the "Pictus Porrectus" exhibition at the Isaac Bell House in Newport, R.I. Jenna Gribbon/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Tony Luong for The New York Times

Their patrons are the writer, curator and native Newporter Dodie Kazanjian, and the curator and art historian Alison M. Gingeras, who organized "Pictus Porrectus" for Art & Newport, an annual art program that Kazanjian founded.

Newport is a fitting locale for a deep dive into portraiture. Enlisting fashionable artists to paint flattering portraits was a way for America's early tycoons "to embody some of the ideals of their British and European counterparts, who have titles and status but also generational wealth," said Leslie B. Jones, the chief curator of the Preservation Society of Newport County.

With those propagandistic images in mind, Kazanjian and Gingeras turned their eyes to the present. "The ghosts of Sargent and Boldini are definitely here," Gingeras said, referring to John Singer Sargent, whose 1890 portrait of Cornelius Vanderbilt II greets visitors at the Breakers, and Giovanni Boldini, whose 1905 painting of Elizabeth Drexel Lehr commands the hall of the Elms. "But a new generation of contemporary artists have dismantled the genre's elitism by depicting new subjects who were historically left out," she continued.

Many of the new paintings were made just for the show (the stipulation was that the entire figure had to be included). Artists range from established heavyweights to rising stars, including John Currin, Chase Hall, Deana Lawson, Sophie Matisse, Aliza Nisenbaum, Nicolas Party, Umar Rashid, Malick Sidibé, Henry Taylor, Salman Toor, Piotr Uklanski and Aleksandra Waliszewska.



The opening at "Pictus Porrectus" at the Isaac Bell House in Newport, R.I., was attended by many of the artists. Tony Luong for The New York Times



The reception at the Isaac Bell House, a restored McKim, Mead & White "cottage" with a mix of Aesthetic style, Japonisme and colonial revival details. Tony Luong for The New York Times

McKinniss's portrait of Happy van Beuren is the only one installed at Rosecliff. The others are at the more modestly scaled, proto-modernist wood-shingled home McKim, Mead, & White designed for Bell before they became the country's go-to Beaux-Arts architects. The figures gather inside like a collection of strangers from different worlds with little in common, united only in their solidarity against the Old Guard.

The curators chose Bell's space, in part, because, unlike the other house museums, it has been left virtually unfurnished, said Kazanjian. On a sunny afternoon last month, as plans were being made to hang the show, it felt as though the family had just left. "These bodies can really occupy the space," she said.

Originally designed for Isaac Bell Jr., a cotton broker turned investor and diplomat, and his wife, Jeannette Bennett Bell, the house was sold after the patriarch died from typhoid fever in 1889, at age 42. The Preservation Society bought it in 1996 and restored its quietly spectacular architectural details — a mix of Aesthetic style, Japonisme, and colonial revival. The only obvious sign of the Bells is an 1882 stained-glass portrait of Master Bertrand Bell, a young cousin, by Eugène Oudinot, on long-term loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The new portraits — real and imagined, from the past and present — inhabit nearly every room and passageway across two floors. There is glammed up Jennifer Lopez at the 2020 Grammy Awards in the Versace gown that famously "broke the internet," by McKinniss, and an expressionistic drawing of a smartly dressed teenage Friedrich Nietzsche by Elizabeth Peyton. And there are intimate depictions of friends, like Nisenbaum's portrait of Ximena, a salsa dancing instructor she befriended at a club in Manhattan, pictured with her roommate Randy. Ella Kruglyanskaya painted her studio manager Tina Keon, posed as a bullfighter, a nod to the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, she said, and inspired by Diego Velázquez. "I always paint what's close to me, in my studio," she said.



Sam McKinniss's glammed-up portrait of Jennifer Lopez, 2018, Tony Luong for The New York Times



Ella Kruglyanskaya, "Tina (La Torera)," 2022 — the model is her studio manager Tina Keon posed as a bullfighter, a nod to Pedro Almodóvar and Diego Velázquez. Tony Luong for The New York Times



Sally J. Han wields a stick for training birds like a paintbrush in "Lessons," 2022, at the Isaac Bell House. via Sally J. Han and Fortnight Institute

Sally J. Han often paints herself. "It's easier than hiring a model," said the artist, who embedded her work here with personal clues. We see her wearing a hanbok, a traditional Korean dress, while she trains her pet birds, holding a stick like a painter might hold a brush in a self-portrait.

The human presence is uncanny in the bedrooms. In Mrs. Bell's, a self-portrait by Celia Paul hovers like a spectral reminder of the fleetingness of youth. In Mr. Bell's bedroom, nudes by Currin, Gribbon, Toor and Ruby Neri (on an adjacent sleeping porch) uncomfortably catch the viewer's gaze. It's a striking contrast to the days when nudes were idealized and portraits were tasked with establishing a sitter's propriety. (The show also includes Gribbon's painting of Toor, as well as a portrait of the artist Chase Hall by Henry Taylor.)

Kazanjian and Gingeras planned to include historical portraits, but ran up against climate control issues. Instead, they invited artists to share their inspirations in the wall text. Goya, Manet, Leonor Fini and María Izquierdo are among those referenced — artists who brought their own kind of truthfulness to the genre.



Celia Paul's spectral "After Watteau," 2022, at the Isaac Bell House. Tony Luong for The New York Times

Newport is a rich setting for truth seeking. In the 1700s, the town was an essential port in the triangular slave trade. Much of Gilded Age Newport's wealth was built on slave and immigrant labor. (Isaac Bell Jr. himself had profited from the cotton trade.)

That's an uncanny connection for the artist Chase Hall, who paints with coffee on cotton. "When I was younger, I was wrapping my head around coffee and cotton and these relationships to colonialism and imperialism," Hall said. "I wanted the idea of coffee to almost haunt the viewer." His vaguely self-referential portrait of a Black man finding a book on a library shelf is called "The Autodidact," recalling his own self-taught path to artmaking.

Andrew LaMar Hopkins, whose ongoing body of work draws attention to free Creoles in antebellum Louisiana, painted a portrait of a brother and sister coded with signs indicating their social status — expensive wallpaper, a book. “Louisiana was one of a few places where, because we were not English, there was a mixture of the races,” he said, adding the siblings have different skin tones “because light-skinned people of color can have a darker child. Color is just not all that simple.”



Umar Rashid, “Avec plaisir. Or, The Newport News according to Lord Baltimore upon his return to New Frengland, joining Phillip Morris’s Hussars and rooting out the last of the Dutch Resistance, 1796, An advertisement for the plantocracy,” 2022. Tony Luong for The New York Times



Andrew LaMar Hopkins, “Creole Brother and Sister,” 2022, in Newport at the Isaac Bell House. Tony Luong for The New York Times

Umar Rashid contributed a fictional equestrian portrait of a Black “Lord Baltimore” from an ongoing series of purposefully anachronistic history paintings that tell the story of the Frenglish, a massive colonial empire he invented. It includes the words “Alive? With Pleasure?” — a direct reference to Newport cigarettes, one of the menthol brands that notoriously marketed to Black people. Coincidentally, the brand was created by Lorillard, the tobacco giant, whose socialite heirs had a stronghold in Newport society.

“I’ve learned how to tell many truths without actually telling them,” Rashid said. “You make sure the message gets out there. You codify it and layer it so that the people who really want to get the message will get it. If you don’t want to get it, then you’ll just see a really nice painting of a guy on a horse.”

Pictus Porrectus: Reconsidering the Full-Length Portrait

Through Oct. 2, at two locations: The Isaac Bell House, 70 Perry Street, Newport, R.I.; Rosecliff, 548 Bellevue Ave, Newport, R.I.; newportmansions.org.