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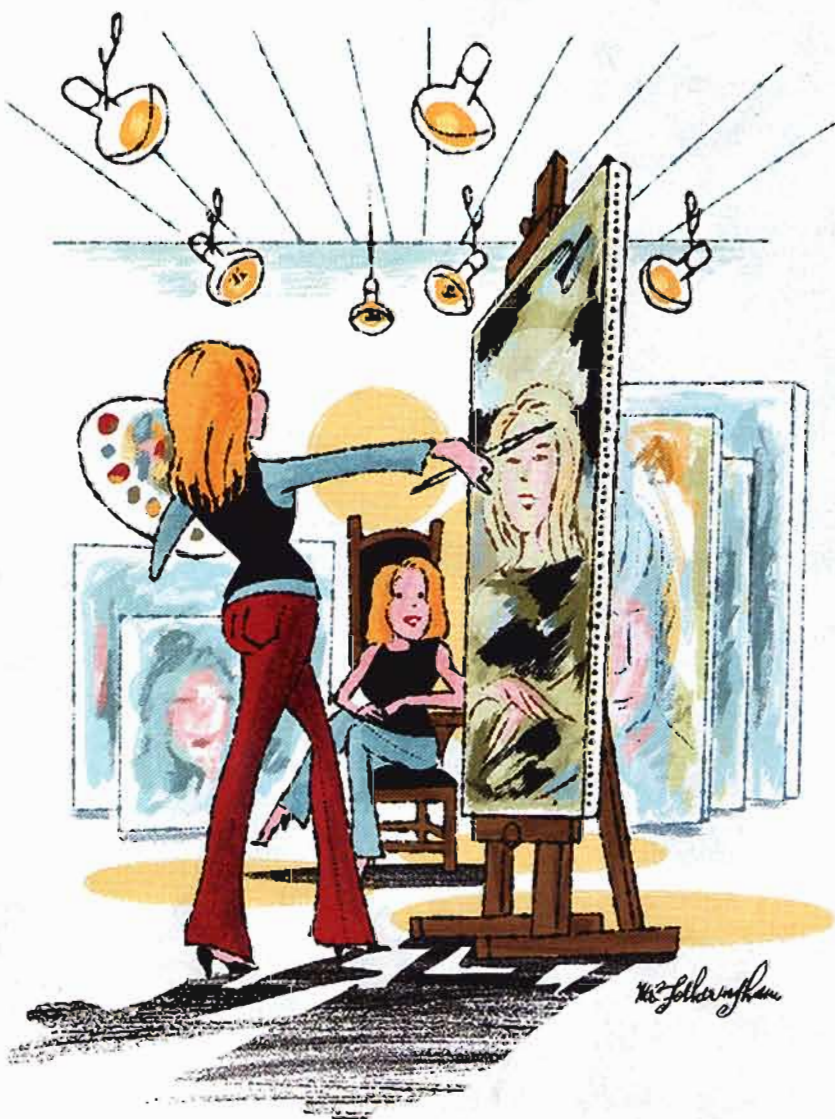


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# Picture Imperfect

BY INGRID CUMMINGS

I've never liked having my photograph taken. But sitting for a portrait was a glamorous way to embrace my visage, especially my imposing eyebrows.



There I sat, practically nose-to-nose with my portrait-painter. She was squinting deeply, looking not at me but at my eyes. We were surrounded by a bevy of sketches and full-fledged paintings of female nudes in all their curvaceous splendor. I, too, felt like a nude, exposed and naked—from the neck up.

"Pale sage green with yellow flecks and blue-gray rims," she reported, after an examination worthy of an ophthalmologist. "Your eye color is unusual; there's even some haunting smoky-blue going on. You clearly have great depth and complexity." I beamed. Is this gal good, or what?

Constance Edwards Scopelitis had positioned me in the full sunlight of her Stutz Building space downtown, her paint-smattered smock and the studio's exposed ductwork lending authentic atmosphere. Oriental rugs partially covered patina'd hardwood. Paint brushes bloomed like bouquets in coffee cans. Paintings in various stages of completion lined the walls and were propped on the floor, and sunlight streamed through south-facing floor-to-ceiling windows. Artists traditionally consider northern light superior, but Scopelitis loves her southern light. "It contradicts conventional wisdom, I know. North light is good for still-life work, but I don't do still-life. What I do is portraits."

In this era of digital photo manipulation, portraiture might seem, at best, quaint or, at worst, outdated. But too often, Scopelitis says, photography fails to reflect a person's true spirit. "People appreciate a painter's kindness

and way of capturing a look in the eye that's often missing in photos," she explains. "Frequently, what a photographer captures is anxiety at being part of a stiff and awkward photo session. Try banishing *that* with Photoshop."

Scopelitis spends a lot of time thinking about her clients' wishes and how to render them in paint with integrity. She is expert at divining what people think about their appearance and what image they wish to portray to the world. "Portraits don't have to be fully realistic," she says. "That's not a moral or ethical dilemma." She's learned to listen like a skilled therapist. "I take cues from what people say. When a woman complains about the size of her rump, I know to trim it down a little."

I fear that Scopelitis will look into my greenish-yellowish-bluish eyes and see me as I do not want to see myself: self-conscious, vain, wilting from attention. And I'm praying that this portrait will not make me look fat.

**BLONDE AND FIT**, with big brown

"I found that even as a child I could draw people," says artist Constance Edwards Scopelitis. "There are great artists who can't do portraits. Who knows why I'm able to do this?"

eyes and a merry smile, Scopelitis exudes warmth and the enviable equanimity of one who, by her own admission, has never held "a real job." That said, she works hard, with a sort of controlled fury. In addition to her Stutz *atelier*, she maintains studios in New Orleans; Maui; and Laguna Beach, California.

As the oldest of four kids growing up in Irvington, Scopelitis attended Howe High School. Her mother was a stay-at-home "craft-a-holic," and her trucking-industry father was also a hobby nut. Neither parent cared much for domestic

discipline or structure. After college at Indiana University, Scopelitis studied painting in New York City, where she received classical, Flemish-style training at the highly regarded Art Students League. "I found that even as a child I could draw people," she says. "There are great artists who can't do portraits. Who knows why I'm able to do this?"

The three-step process of portraiture starts, ironically, with ordinary photography. Scopelitis takes dozens of snapshots of her subject, or works from a supplied one. "Women have cried after seeing how bad their photos can be," she says. Often, her subjects will say "I want this head on that body," and mix and match photos. "Sometimes, I meet with women who bring in photos from 10 years ago and ask for those eyes." Others request that their waists be made smaller; shadows obliterated; moles removed; creases smoothed.

For my portrait, I brought in a recent photo of myself—one of the off-the-cuff, point-and-click snapshot variety. As is invariably the case with me, it was



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notably better than ones I have formally sat for. Scopelitis sketched my photographic likeness in pencil and charcoal, then transposed it to linen (not canvas, surprisingly). "You never transpose until you get it right," she says. "Do not attempt to paint a face if you cannot draw a face."

I then visited her studio to see what she had sketched before we proceeded to oil. (Scopelitis insists on getting feedback from clients at every stage of the process, so there are no unhappy surprises at the end). My reaction was swift: I loved it. With the exception of my trademark Leonid Brezhnev eyebrows, which were not quite assertive enough for my taste, the black-and-white image worked for me in a big way.

The next step involved coloring my entire face and neck with a bilious blue-green paint, a process called underpainting. "This is what I'll lay flesh on," Scopelitis told me. And then, at last, we were at the stage that everyone thinks of in portraiture: the sitting. I perched stock-still in front of her easel for 30 minutes as she fine-tuned what had been just a rendering based on a photo. With NPR talk-radio droning sleepily in the background and the sun streaming in through those huge Stutz windows, I was tempted to doze, but she needed to see my peepers, so I zoned out in a catatonic stare.

"You've got great nostrils," she exulted. "All kinds of good going on here. You're a feast for a portrait-painter: cheekbones, mouth, widow's peak, eyes, eyebrows." My feast gets a little more Rubenesque the farther south one goes, so I abstained from an *au naturel* full-body painting.

Although I have no weird moles or anything of that sort, I do have areas that are—*ahem*—needful of improvement. I was increasingly anxious about how she was portraying me, even though I should have felt emboldened by the beauty of my charcoal sketch. I could not help but hope that she might clean up any lack of tidiness around the eyes; banish any lassitude around the jawline; do away with any double-chinniness or undue baggitude; make my cheekbones pop, my



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eyes glisten, my skin dewy. Nervously, I made jokes, trying not to move my face or, most challengingly, my lips. "Let's call this Botox via oil paint," I quipped.

Patently enduring my babbling, Scopelitis assembled a dozen well-worn brushes, then squirted dabs of oil paint onto a Lucite board—not the traditional oval palette with a thumb-hole. To create what I think of as my run-of-the-mill skin tone, she used a dozen or more disparate and unlikely colors, including Naples yellow, Alizarin crimson, and ultramarine blue. When she wrapped up, I couldn't yet bear to look at her work; I was antsy to get going. "Wait," she said. "I cheated you out of some eyelid I need to put back in."

During my final sitting, I reminded my portrait artist not to skimp on my Dracula-like widow's peak, and I insisted again on my Frida Kahlo brow. This painting would have to explore the eternal tension between reality and illusion.

**PAINTING COMMISSIONED** portraits can be stressful work; clients are understandably demanding. To compensate, Scopelitis also creates what she calls "figurative paintings," imaginative works such as mermaids and madonnas. "Painting anything other than portraits represents a tremendous relief compared with the precision required for portraits," she says.

Still, portraits are her bread and butter. In one stunning example, a local woman, raven-haired, ivory-skinned, poses in a formal gown beside her piano, a clear homage to the famous *Madame X* by John Singer Sargent. "I was at a crossroads in my life, and I thought, 'I'm going to do my portrait,'" says Raginae Laughlin, 38, the subject of the painting. "I wanted to look proud and confident,

like I'd accomplished something." A pianist, Laughlin praises Scopelitis for portraying her "hands and knuckles just right, which is remarkable," and values her painting beyond a photograph. "A portrait is more humanistic and sensual, since someone painted it and touched it and spent time. Sometimes it's hard to look at, because it has an epic, transcendent feel."

Cherise Watkins, 38, of Indy, a bartender and restaurant-management trainee, met Scopelitis at an art opening. The artist needed a Queen Latifah-like African-American woman to model for a Polynesian-queen painting she was doing, part of a series of life-size nudes. Watkins received a modeling fee to pose in the buff, though Scopelitis did alter her likeness slightly. "I was nervous the day of the appointment," Watkins admits. "I'm not a small woman, but I didn't ask her to make me slimmer." The finished painting is priced at \$22,000, which makes Watkins howl in amazement: "I'm going to be in some rich person's bathroom!"

Scopelitis charges \$7,000 to \$9,500 for a head-and-shoulder oil portrait. Anything more full-body, and she charges "by the arm and leg—literally," she says. "That's where the expression comes from."

During my final sitting, I reminded Scopelitis not to skimp on my Dracula-like widow's peak, and I insisted again on my Frida Kahlo brow. This painting would need to explore the eternal tension between reality and illusion.

**AT LAST**, I arrived at the Stutz for the long-awaited moment of truth: the unveiling. Verdict? I gasped in a moment rife with complexity. I'm a babe! This is what I would look like if I didn't look like what I look like. No hollows, bags, blemishes, wrinkles, pouches, warts, pits, jowls, or wattles.

Yet my pleasure was tempered with a considerable dollop of embarrassment, keenly aware as I am of the gap between artistic fantasy and unvarnished actuality. I went through a myriad of other emotions—shame for having let myself

go, guilt for being so vain, and sorrow for the damage time does to us all.

I took my portrait home. The longer I gaze at it, the more I begin to look like Richard Nixon, shifty-eyed and in need of a shave. Some days, Elvis' snarling lip emerges from my portrait. One day I am wild about it; a week later, apathetic.

I could blame the lack of proper lighting in my house, but the truth is, I am just not all that comfortable with how I look. Sure, I wanted the eerie, nuanced realism of Edward Hopper, not the idealized Thomas Kinkadee version of myself. I got what I asked for, and now I have to live with it—literally.

At this point, the portrait is like another person who has moved into my home, someone I need to strike up a rapprochement with. Slowly, we're working through our process of detente, and our relationship is building. Eventually, I hope we learn to like each other. ●

*To view the finished portrait, visit [www.indianapolismonthly.com](http://www.indianapolismonthly.com)*

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