

Casey Childs | The Human Form

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Utah painter Casey Childs is a master of thoughtful portraiture

By Bonnie Gangelhoff



Casey Childs, Sliver, oil, 30 x 20.

Viewers often wonder where artists find their models. For Utah-based painter Casey Childs, the answer is, everywhere—even at his favorite local café. One day not long ago, Childs was having lunch with his wife, Amanda, when he noticed their young server. “She had beautiful long brown hair and looked just like a model from a Waterhouse painting,” he says, referring to British painter John William Waterhouse [1849-1917]. Childs asked the young woman to model, and they set a date. But when she arrived on the scheduled day, her long brown tresses had been chopped off to her chin, and the hair that remained was dyed orange. “I wondered, ‘What am I going to do with this?’” Childs says.

But Childs believes in responding to artistic problems “organically,” so he quickly regrouped and set about capturing his muse as she appeared. He recalls that the young woman seemed embarrassed because she was not the type who would have such a bold hairstyle. Shy and ill at ease, her gangly arms and legs settled into awkward poses. Her demeanor didn’t change despite Childs’ efforts to reassure her. When the painting was finished, he titled it SLIVER. “She looked so uncomfortable, and what’s more uncomfortable than a sliver?” Childs says.

In 2018, SLIVER won second prize at the Portrait Society of America’s prestigious annual competition and the purchase award at the Art Renewal Center’s Salon. “If an artist can let it happen, sometimes they get a better result. Let it be what it is, and don’t worry about the original idea,” Childs says.



Casey Childs, Adoration of the Hi-Fi Diptych, Panel 1, oil, 48 inches.



Casey Childs, Adoration of the Hi-Fi Diptych, Panel 2, oil, 48 inches.



Casey Childs, Non-fiction, oil, 30 x 40.

In many ways, 2018 was a milestone year for Childs. In addition to winning prestigious awards, he also celebrated the 20th anniversary of his graduation from Northwest College in Powell, WY, where he studied with artist John Giarrizzo. The college invited Childs back to give the commencement address as a

distinguished alumnus and also to pay homage to Giarrizzo, who was retiring. “John set me on a path to be an artist,” Childs says. “He ignited a fire in me. He was so passionate about the Renaissance painters. I fell in love with figurative painting.”

In his commencement speech, Childs quoted educator and writer Joseph Campbell, who once said, “If your path is clear, you are on someone else’s path.” Be patient, he urged the students. And he shared a few lessons from his own life.

After he graduated from Northwest, a two-year college, he received a scholarship to the studio art program at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT. Childs harbored dreams of becoming a full-time fine artist someday. However, after graduation from BYU in 2001, he accepted a position as a graphic designer for a local company. “I needed a paycheck,” he told the students.

By then he was married with plans to start a family; he occasionally painted in his spare time. Five years into the job, in 2006, he met renowned artist William “Bill” Whitaker in what proved a fateful encounter. Childs gathered up the courage to ask Whitaker if he could apprentice with him. For several years, he studied with his new mentor once a week, learning about the creative and business sides of art as well as the importance of a strong work ethic.

In 2010, Childs asked his boss if he could work a part-time schedule so that he could more seriously pursue fine art. The boss “called his bluff,” Childs recalls, offering him a promotion to an art-director position—but that meant more hours, more work, and even less time to paint. Childs took a deep breath and quit. Initially, he told the Northwest graduates, no one came knocking on his door to buy his paintings. “I was good, but not good enough that the galleries couldn’t ignore me.”



Rather than scouring around for gallery representation, entering shows, and marketing himself on a grand scale, he decided to focus on only one thing: getting better as an artist. For the next few years he worked diligently on improving his drawing skills, paint application, and ability to see in subtler ways. Eventually, galleries came calling. Ultimately, he advised the graduates, “Be so good they can’t ignore you. And the way to do this is to be teachable. Surround yourself with people who are smarter, better, or more talented than you, and continue learning.”

When it comes to style, Childs is a self-described contemporary realist. He combines finely honed drawing and painting skills harking back to the old masters with an eye for the human experience today. His portraits sometimes evoke an ethereal sensibility, perhaps because he is less interested in capturing an exact likeness and more interested in capturing the soul of his subjects. Childs’ narrative pieces tend to feature ordinary people in ordinary clothes—jeans, parkas, sneakers, tattoo sleeves, stiletto heels. They’re caught in of-the-moment poses, too: A woman reaches for her iPhone; a middle-aged man in a dark suit listens to turquoise headphones.

Figurative works have captured Childs’ imagination since the 1970s when he was growing up in Lovell, WY. Back then his subjects of choice were G.I. Joe and characters from *Star Wars*. “I’ve always been intrigued that we all have ears, eyes, noses, and mouths, and yet no one looks exactly the same,” he says. One of Childs’ most intriguing recent paintings features a young woman sitting on a windowsill, her long black dress spilling over the frame. She stares dreamily into space, lost in thought. Childs says the inspiration for TAKE THESE BROKEN WINGS springs from the idea that the path before us is not always obvious; the figure is a symbol of uncertainty. “The old weathered home contrasts with her youth and innocence,” he says. “With time and experience she will realize she can take her broken wings and learn to fly, free from the entanglements of past troubles, rising above to a new future.”



Casey Childs, *Here Comes the Sun*, oil, 18 x 14.



Casey Childs, *Phylis Vander Naald*, oil, 20 x 16.



Casey Childs, *Portrait of a Girl*, oil.

What makes the painting especially meaningful for Childs is that he considers it a breakthrough. "I feel this piece was totally complete, from how it was composed to how I applied the paint," he says. "I was able to capture the feel and texture of different materials, such as wood and peeling paint, with a paint application similar to textures of paintings I've admired in museums."

The piece is emblematic of Childs' ability to convey both mood and emotion. Dr. Rita Wright, director of Utah's Springville Museum of Art, has followed the artist's career for nearly a decade and says that he is a master of portraiture and thoughtfulness. "The emotional content of Casey's work is superior, and the fact that he can represent deep, insightful concepts with technical vivacity and skill is special," Wright says. "Many artists have great ideas but do not have the level of technical expertise to bring them forward. Casey's portraits reveal this characteristic, as do his more narrative pieces, which focus on the emotional and internal psychology of individuals."

While Childs is known for his narrative works, he is just as likely to create a painting without a message. For example, in several recent paintings featuring winged figures, despite how it might appear to viewers, there is no message. Childs says that the wings are merely a design element that intrigued him. "I wanted to put shapes together in an interesting way," he says.

In both portraits and narrative pieces, Childs' mission is to convey the beauty and complexities of the human form. He is fond of saying that he considers all his paintings to be self-portraits, even though none depict him. "When I look back at something I created, I can remember all the struggles, successes, and failures I was experiencing at the time," Childs says. "In a way, they are like a diary or journal of my artistic journey."



Casey Childs, Portrait Sketch, oil.



Casey Childs, Sarah, oil, 12 x 8.



Casey Childs, Tide Pools, oil, 36 x 24.

William Whitaker passed away in March, and Oil Painters of America asked Childs to pay tribute to his mentor at its annual exhibition and convention in June. While speaking to the audience gathered for the event, Childs choked up as he described Whitaker's dedication to excellence, work ethic, and generosity in sharing his knowledge. "He took me under his wing and showed me what a working professional artist looks like," Childs said.

After his emotional tribute, he returned to his seat, and the awards presentation began. When it came time to present the Gold Medal, artist Craig Tennant, the competition's juror, took the microphone. "I think this painting is brilliant. It has everything in it that you need in a great painting," Tennant said, singling out the emotional content and story line. As he continued, an image of TAKE THESE BROKEN WINGS popped up on the screen. The audience burst into applause, rising to their feet as Childs approached the stage to accept the award. In his acceptance speech, Childs thanked Tennant and OPA, and then he briefly raised his arms skyward and said, "Thank you, Bill, for helping jury on high."

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