

# A WILL OF THEIR OWN

## *Stories of Commitment and Resolve*

FINALISTS FROM THE 2014 INTERNATIONAL PORTRAIT COMPETITION DISCUSS HOW TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES.

BY KRISTLE STRICKLIN

Often in times of uncertainty, I find myself clinging to the old saying that assures us, "Where there's a will, there's a way." Like so many other motivational axioms, this adage is really about commitment to a dream and the willingness to find your way there, in spite of the obstacles. History shows us that many artists have proven this point true. Consider how it took 14 years for Edward Hopper to sell his first painting and half a decade more to sell his second, and many know the story that Vincent van Gogh sold only one work during his lifetime.

Every artist's artistic journey is unique, but within that journey is usually a story about overcoming obstacles, whether physical, emotional or other. This year, as I talked to many of the Portrait Society's *International Portrait Competition* finalists, I was at once inspired by a common theme of stories about determination, setting goals and achieving success.

Bryce Billings, the 2014 Draper Grand Prize winner, knows a little something about overcoming obstacles. Billings' training began by taking life drawing, painting and illustration classes at Salt Lake Community College, though he explains, "much of my education came from direct examination and admiration of other artists work."

On his winning work, *A Father's Dreams and a Son's Love*, Billings says, "At the time of this painting I was facing a future



where I would once again have to put my dreams of being an artist on hold and rely on a career of construction to provide for me and my son. I had been down that road so many times before and did not want to give up on my dreams." Resolved to see his dreams fulfilled, Billings put everything in his life on hold, set up a temporary studio inside his kitchen, and for two and a half months painted *A Father's Dreams and a Son's Love*.

Take one look at his monumental canvas and it becomes clear that his commitment to the piece was successful. Billings' work displays an exquisite and classic appreciation for form and gesture while capturing a contemporary perspective, arousing an immediate response from viewer. The ambitious composition succeeds in keeping the viewer engaged in the piece through the elements and principles of its design. Every careful detail, from the affectionate pose of the figures to the rolling clouds encircling father and son, serves to animate the scene with heartfelt energy. To render the figures in such an emotive way, Billings explains, "I love chasing the subtle colors in the flesh tones of someone's face, trying to get it just right in order to make someone feel that they are seeing life. I believe the closer I can get to accurate expression,

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Alicia Ponzo, *In Recent Days, A Self Portrait*, plaster, 23 x 10 x 10"

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Bryce Billings, *A Father's Dreams and a Son's Love*, oil, 48 x 36"



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**3**  
**Gavin Glakas,**  
*Firelight Sonata,*  
 oil on canvas,  
 40 x 30"

**4**  
**Seth Haverkamp,**  
*Ponderings,*  
 oil on board,  
 36 x 24"

**5**  
**Kelly Carmody,**  
*Self Portrait,*  
 oil on canvas,  
 65 x 36"

**6**  
**Jeffrey Hein,**  
*Cold,* oil on  
 linen, 20 x 16"

properties of a face, but also the intrigue of looking at a finished portrait and wondering about that person. Who they are, what they are doing or thinking, and why."

These questions certainly come to mind when viewing Haverkamp's aptly titled work *Ponderings*. The pensive, young girl in this work sits quietly veiled by waves of golden hair and a haunting silence.

For many artists overcoming obstacles can involve a period of trial and error. Artist Kelly Carmody, a traditional studio painter and this year's third-place winner recently became interested in plein air painting and experienced the challenges that come with toting your canvas outdoors.

"Going from a very controlled environment to the outdoors where change is constant was a difficult adjustment," Carmody explains. "Just choosing what to paint was hard, as well as working with an entirely new palette."

To meet these challenges, Carmody says, "I went to the same spot every day and worked morning, noon and evening, trying to capture the different weather and light effects." Her winning self-portrait perfectly captures her commitment to her craft, as she stands confidently with palette and maulstick in hand.



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This year the Portrait Society awarded a First Place in Sculpture prize that went to the talented Alicia Ponzio, for her work *In Recent Days, A Self Portrait*. Ponzio's work shows a command of anatomy and an ability to translate it into sculpture.

On her interest in portraiture, Ponzio says, "I am fascinated by faces, and what they reveal, and have been as long as I can remember. I focus a great deal on figure modeling in my work, but I always have at least one portrait project going on as well, as I enjoy the unique challenges of portraying an individual."

She also shares, "I've had some difficult experiences, which have helped me grow and ultimately have given me confidence." As such, Ponzio's expertly rendered bust captures a moment in her life when, having overcome past experiences, she felt that she was no longer looking over her shoulder, but instead was looking forward.

Having the passion to push forward and the will to "find a way" defines the path of successful artists, and each of our finalists' stories reveals how creating a career in the arts requires a certain resilience and willingness to face a variety of obstacles. ●



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likeness, lighting and color, the closer I will be able to connect with the viewer and get them to have an emotional experience.”

Certificate of Excellence winner, Gavin Glakas, is also no stranger to life’s untimely hurdles. Glakas explains, “Growing up, I had always planned to be an artist, but as I was trying to decide between art school and a traditional college, I spoke to a number of professional artists who told me not to pursue art because I wouldn’t be able to feed my family, so I planned to go to law school and paint on the weekends.”

He continues: “Soon after graduating I got a job working on Capitol Hill, and I felt worse than a failure. I reasoned that failures at least try to do something and fail at it, whereas I didn’t even have the courage to do the one thing I wanted.”

At that point he tells, “I got really sick. I spent the next six months in and out of hospitals and eventually had a benign tumor removed from my lung, but that experience instilled in me the drive to do whatever needed to be done to be able to draw and paint for a living.” His work, *Firelight Sonata*, embodies his interest in the “transitory nature of life” and how humans interact with nature and one another.

Early on, artist Jeffery Hein, faced an all-too-common obstacle for representational and figurative artists today—a lack of traditional training at the university level. Hein, whose work titled



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*Cold* won Second Place in Painting, recalls, “In 2008, six years into my professional career, I took over two years off from selling paintings and spent that time trying to teach myself methods of painting that I only saw in works of dead artists and few living artists that were inaccessible to me. This time was hands down the most important years of my training.”

Ever-committed to his vocation, Hein declares unequivocally, “I will be studying until I die, because my work is never good enough. Painting is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” Though I might argue that his work is somewhere far beyond good enough, I realize that this sentiment is one shared with the truly great artists—the ones who never cease moving forward.

Likewise, artist Seth Haverkamp has continued to paint and to challenge himself as an artist, despite any struggles that life has thrown his way. To my mind, Haverkamp’s work is so appealing because somehow he not only accurately captures the subject of the composition, but also the emotional power. His interest in portraiture can be traced back to his childhood and stems from a desire to understand the hidden qualities of an individual’s expression.

He says, “I grew up painting portraits of my siblings from pictures in my parent’s photo albums. I chose portraiture because for me there’s just nothing more interesting. Not only the physical