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PROVIDENCE

MONTHLY

Julie Gearan on Painting the Governor

by Liz Lee
October 27, 2014



Julie Gearan, photograph by Brian Demello

I'm standing with artist Julie Gearan at her South Side studio and we're looking at a small oil painting she made last year. The painting's subject stands alone, awash in light, casting a gray shadow on a white wall. The subject is a pair of silver truck nuts.

Truck nuts, if you don't know, are those shiny metal ornaments men sometimes hang on the back of their cars and trucks, lest fellow motorists forget they're driving behind someone with testicles. I'm silently wondering how Julie has managed to make them appear dignified, even somehow beautiful. Julie is wondering aloud – partly in earnest, partly in jest – how on earth she got chosen to paint the governor's portrait.

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Rhode Island state law requires that an official portrait of each governor be commissioned before he or she leaves office, and Julie was chosen out of 124 applicants who responded when the state Council on the Arts put out a nationwide call for artists last year. While she may seem like an unlikely choice based on her sometimes unusual subjects, it's actually not difficult to see why Governor Chafee selected her.

Julie's body of work is filled with the kind of depth and drama that makes good portraiture so much more than simulacrum. Her subjects sleep naked and sharpen knives, they knock over teacups, blow smoke, glide weightlessly over fields of ice. They pull up blinds and push back curtains, reaching out, letting the light in. Her paintings tell stories, and like the characters in any good narrative, Julie's subjects don't just sit there, they move and change. So which story will Governor Chafee's portrait tell?

"I know he wants something different, or else he wouldn't have chosen me to do this," says Julie. "And one of the things I've come to after talking to him is that he feels sort of isolated there at the State House. I can't not think in metaphor, so I want to imbue [the portrait] with some sense of what this term has been like for him."

Julie is drawing inspiration partly from the work of Gilbert Stuart, 18th century painter and Rhode Islander, whose work she says made portraiture less about mere likeness and more about strong painting, with room for movement and even a sense of humor. But a quick walk through the halls of the State House, where Chafee's portrait will ultimately reside, conveys a sense of just how little room there has historically been for humor and movement in the portraiture of Rhode Island politicians. With a few exceptions, it's all leather armchairs and blank stares, like Charles C. Van Zandt (1877-1880), who sits with a bored expression and overgrown muttonchops, like a portly 19th century hipster.

Ultimately, it's up to Chafee to decide just how much his portrait will deviate from the norm. And while he's open to new ideas, Julie says he's already shot down a few. "In some ways I am restrained from really doing the painting that I might want to do," says Julie. "But the painting I want to do is of him with his shirt off," she laughs. "And you just can't do that!" She's joking. I think.

Governor Chafee's portrait is scheduled to be unveiled in January 2015.