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Mercury

Man in the long black coat

A nearly subversive take on the gubernatorial portrait



The official portrait of former Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee, by Providence artist Julie Gearan. 2014, oil on canvas, 68 x 38 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects

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By Alexander Castro | Mercury |

Julie Gearan's portrait of former governor Lincoln D. Chafee is hiding beneath a black cloth. Illuminated by a single light, you can see all the wrinkles in the fabric, an awkwardly plain sight in the opulent State Room of the Rhode Island Statehouse.

Then, at 10 a.m., Gearan and Rhode Island State Council on the Arts Executive Director Randall Rosenbaum whip the covering away, revealing a 68-inch tall oil painting. A piece of the fabric gets stuck on the edge of the frame, and neither Gearan nor Rosenbaum can reach it.

"Anyone over 5'7"?" asks Rosenbaum. A man tears away the pesky, final corner, and a round of applause courses through the room as a melancholic Chafee emerges from beneath the cloth. Surrounded by a tempest of ruminating earth tones, Chafee's gaze never meets the viewer. His hand rests on a rock, as if he has just landed in some strange place and is in need of an anchor. His collared shirt morphs into a wisp of air as it moves down his body. A shy splash of murky white lies low in the background, and marshy grasses creep up from the bottom of the frame.

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“I was very surprised — as a painter of less traditional subjects — to be chosen,” says Gearan. She can partly credit her triumph to Cade Tompkins Projects, a Providence gallery and dealership where Chafee first saw Gearan’s work in person.

“[Chafee] really could appreciate the beauty of her painting,” says Cade Tompkins. After a pool of 124 applicants had been narrowed down by state officials, Chafee personally chose Gearan to render him immortal. “He knew he was in good hands with her,” says Tompkins. He had seen Gearan’s work at Tompkins’ “Selfies & Friends: Contemporary Portraiture.”

Chafee was a reluctant subject; he didn’t want to spend taxpayer money on his own portrait. He initially asked Gearan for “something abstract.”

“I had to say, ‘What do you mean by ‘abstract?’ All painting is abstract. All art is abstract ... I had to sometimes forget about what he told me,” says Gearan, a student of abstract expressionism. “It’s been very different from the way I normally work ... I quietly fetter away in my studio.”

With Art Theory 101 out of the way, Gearan and Chafee got down to specifics. Did Chafee want props? No, no props. Says Tompkins, “He didn’t want the typical man-sitting-on-desk, or man-in-front-of-desk, or man-behind-desk.” He vetoed every accessory except one: the long, flowing, wraith-like overcoat.

“[Chafee] bucked stubbornly for a while because he doesn’t wear a coat like that,” says Gearan. She borrowed one from a relative and had Chafee model it. “I put that overcoat on a couple of times myself,” says Gearan. She noted its movement in the light, the motions sewn into the shape and seams. Gearan complemented her careful sartorial study with a charred color palette influenced by Francisco Goya and John Singer Sargent.

“Gearan’s portraits have the same emotive feeling as Sargent’s work,” says Tompkins. “We still are so very pleased to stand in front of [Sargent’s] paintings as we understand so much from his work just by the use of posture, color, light and dark.”

Gearan’s Chafee is a nearly subversive take on the gubernatorial portrait. He almost looks as if he’d rather not have a portrait at all. Like Sargent, Gearan layers complex emotions into paint, infusing the canvas with mystery and meaning. The anxiety of politics is inscribed on Chafee’s face, a trauma only the regal know. For an oil painting, it’s technically, formally, splendid. For an oil painting that will hang in the Statehouse, it is indeed tempestuous.

Still, gut responses reign in the body politic. “There are gonna be a lot of responses that have to do with him, and not so much the painting. That I expected,” says Gearan. Regardless, she’s delighted to have her art in the Statehouse.

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“It is a public piece of art. As an oil painter ... I don't get to put my work out there like that,” says Gearan, whose much-cited \$15,000 commission fee amounted to “probably \$4 an hour... which is not a bad price.” (She had to pay for her own supplies and materials.)

For Tompkins, Gearan's timeless work is a bargain at any price.

“Julie's painting will never look dated ... It will never look like ‘That was done in the '70s,’” says Tompkins. “That's part of her work — you don't know when it was painted.”

Chafee loved it, say Gearan and Tompkins, but he didn't attend the unveiling. He's on vacation, and didn't want to distract from Governor Gina Raimondo's nascent term. Maybe Gearan's Chafee is thinking about plane tickets, destinations, what to pack in his luggage. A governor's post-political life is something few of us can know or experience. Gearan shares with us her glimpse into this exclusive fatigue. Even big shots get the blues.