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Julie Gearan is interested in conveying universal messages through her work. | photo by Scott Lapham 90 PH

RISD News

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by Simone Solondz

Adjunct faculty member Julie Gearan isn't known for her portraiture, so she was surprised to learn last winter that her application to paint outgoing Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee had risen to the top of the pile. "I wanted him to know what he was getting into," she notes drily, "so I invited him to see my work in person in a group show at Cade Tompkins Projects in Providence."

After winning the commission and working on the painting for almost a year – mostly based on Chafee's multiple sittings in her West Side studio – Gearan unveiled the stately yet decidedly unconventional portrait in January 2015 at the RI State House, where it will remain on permanent display. In it Chafee stands in a long black coat somberly gazing into the distance, his hand resting on a boulder and dark clouds massing behind him.

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“He didn’t like the coat at first,” Gearan recalls. “He was concerned that it would make him look too aristocratic. But I wanted the dark background to come forward and almost envelope him – to create an ambiguous relationship between the background and the figure.”

Gearan also sees the long, heavy coat as a metaphor for Chafee’s power and responsibility as governor. “That’s a weight that every elected official carries,” she says, adding that the boulder represents his commitment to preserving the environment, and the dark clouds (with just a small opening where the light seeps in) symbolize the tough economic times during which Chafee governed (2010–14).

The portrait is inspired by the work of 18th-century Rhode Island painter Gilbert Stuart, but like everything Gearan paints reflects her unique take on the subject she’s portraying. “A portrait is such a personal thing,” she explains. “All of my paintings start with something personal and subjective and then pull back to the universal – honing in on a moment in time that tells a larger story. With a good painting, you feel like there’s a life in there that you just stepped into – like it’s all still going on.”

A series of whale paintings Gearan is currently working on evolved from a moment in time when she encountered *Jonah Swallowed*, a small sculpture at the Cleveland Museum of Art. “It’s a tiny sea creature with human legs sticking out of its mouth,” she explains. “I drew it and then dreamed that night about rescuing a man who was swallowed whole by a fish.”

Though the sculpture dates back to approximately 290 AD, Gearan feels an affinity with artists who came before and studies their work almost as a form of conversation. “These are my people,” she explains. “Looking at their work is like talking to the elders. I don’t know what I would do without their partnership.”

When she teaches painting, however, Gearan is careful not to provide historical references that are too close to a student’s developing style. “There’s a danger in having your work validated too early,” she explains. “I might suggest that a student look at paintings from three different periods so that they don’t feel pigeonholed or become too derivative.”

Gearan currently teaches part-time in RISD’s [Illustration](#) and [Painting](#) departments and through Continuing Ed as well as at Roger Williams University. “I love the energy at RISD,” she says, “and I enjoy helping students find different ways to communicate the same idea.”

Working almost exclusively with oil, Gearan likes “the tooth” of sable paintbrushes and tends to work “big and brushy.” But she’s always challenging her own technique – pushing back as needed for the sake of the work. “The technique,” Gearan notes, “is driven by what the painting requires.”