



POPULATION

# Ray Turner

Review by **Grady Harp**

**R**AY TURNER has been a successful artist for many years now. Living, painting and teaching in Pasadena, California, Turner has become one of the most highly respected representational artists across the country for his moody, psychological landscapes and cityscapes, images of ancient broken buildings and monuments as well the old trains moving across his impressive canvases at a speed that punctuates his concept of the passage of time and the importance of capturing the essence of history in the images that emerge from his canvases today.

“Finding new ways of saying things – that’s the trick.”

For a painter whose large seascapes and landscapes have suggested the influence of the ‘other Turner’ (JMW Turner) as well as Monet, encountering his figurative work at first seems jarring and out of place with his romantically imbued subject matter. But Turner has been painting portraits since the 1980s – his first ‘model’ was a beloved elderly friend, Joe, whom he painted almost every day until Joe’s death at the age of 96. And from that artistic and emotional experience Turner learned not only how to observe and recreate what was before his eyes, but also how to burn images in his mind of friends and

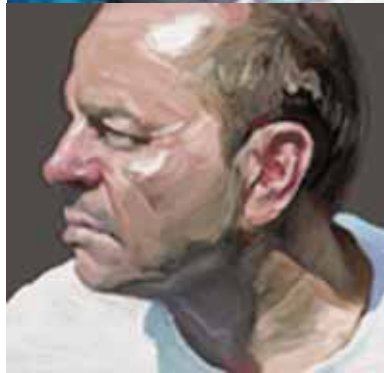


Left to right – top row: **BARCLAY / NORA / AGEE** bottom row: **BETSY / EDWIN / PORTERFIELD**

random people around him – images that at times were captured in photographs while at other times embed and provide fragments of pictorial fodder from which Turner could draw at random to create both imaginary portraits and portraits of specific individuals assembled solely from memory.

Paul Gauguin wrote: *‘It is well for young men to have a model, but let them draw the curtain over it when they are painting. It is better to paint from memory, for thus the work will be your own; your sensation, your intelligence and your soul will triumph over the eye of the amateur. Do not finish your work too much.’* And so it appears in examining Turner’s now popular on-going project he calls **Population**, a series of heads painted on glass, each 12” X 12”, that he has stepped into another era of art history: his use of color and raw emotion is not unlike the work of the Fauvists. These brilliant, intense small paintings capture information not only about the person he is painting or recreating from memory, but also about the influence of the passage of time and the inner emotions that color each of our faces, our demeanor.

While Ray Turner’s magisterial impressionistic creations of the land and cities and machines, the cacophonous sea tossing ships and dissonant clouds reward the viewer’s eye with the majesty of nature and the history of art, his practiced craft of drawing forth images of the face is no less emotional. When asked why he elects to paint his portraits on glass, he replies: *‘One of the main attributes of working on glass is the clean, perfect surface. I like the fact that you cannot be finicky about the application, or the slickness will work against you. So you have to apply generous*



*amounts of paint or it won’t work. The transparency of glass is important for me as it sets up the color part of the exercise. The background is painted long before I start the head, so it influences my choices in carrying out the color study and, in no small measure, dictates the outcome of the final piece.’*

Turner paints the portrait on the surface of the glass, placing the background color on the under surface of the block of wood to which the glass is secured: these tones can be variations of grey or intense hues of violet or blue or other colors that enhance the ultimate statement of the portrait’s impact. At times the portraits are precise and realistic as in **Barclay** and **Nora**, at times the characteristics are more loosely delineated as in **Betsy**, while other faces seem to emerge from near random brushstrokes as in **Jesus** and **Edwin**.

Though viewing these images individually is satisfying, seeing these widely disparate people in rows and stacks on museum or gallery walls (the exhibition **RAY TURNER: POPULATION** is currently touring) is not only an overwhelming display of virtuosity of painting, it is also a tribute to the similarities as well as unique characteristics in the faces that surround us, as though Turner has taken a visual census for us to appreciate the diversity of mankind. *‘The new portrait paintings are the full circle in the continuum of my first and most profound experience of painting someone I love.’* Where Ray Turner’s diverse gifts of visual and spiritual communication will take him next is pregnant with anticipation.

Top to Bottom:  
**JESUS / MANNY /  
 SELF-PORTRAIT /  
 RICK / RICHARD**