

A man in a blue shirt is shown from the side, painting a large, soft, ethereal portrait on a wall. The portrait is a face with large, expressive eyes, rendered in a style that is both delicate and powerful. The man is using a brush to apply paint, and the overall atmosphere is one of quiet concentration and artistic creation.

DIFFERENT

Our writer interviews renowned artist Brad Noble on his two new painting techniques—vapor and membrane—and gets a taste of what it's like to be the artist's muse.

BY SARA EAKER

PHOTOS BY KEVIN O'RILEY

■ Brad Noble uses paint thinner to soften the vapor portrait, as it continues to develop into a sharper image.

STROKES

■ Behind Sara Eaker is the preliminary stage of her vapor portrait, the haze of an image.

“VAPOR FACES HAVE MANY WAYS TO ENTER INTO THEM,”

says Brad Noble, describing one of his current painting techniques. “In short, or ideally, they are essence studies of an ambiguous human face. They are color studies and subtle experiments meant to challenge my need to be literal... less is more when making them. After I lay in the first part (a soft “china marker” sketches a subtle outline of eyes, a nose, a mouth), I try to destroy it, only to soften to a point of ambiguity, which allows the viewer’s mind to fill in the gaps.”

Noble, one of Springfield’s most prolific and well-known art darlings, comes equipped with national recognition and exhibitions in galleries from SoHo to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Arriving at his in-house studio, a space he and his wife have converted from the original Noble and Associates office, you can’t help but feel that the studio is a metaphor for his and his wife’s eclectic personas. He surrounds himself with inspiration. Injecting himself with visual stimulation as if it were an I.V. leading directly into his artistic vein. Two hairless cats named Twiggy and Picachu howl for attention in the corner as his 2-year-old daughter crawls under a ping-pong table placed next to an electric drum set. A fluorescent kite leans against an old Japanese Pachinko machine. A hint of Pine Sol wrestles against the smell of turpentine. The Pine Sol



is losing in this match. There is an old Philco refrigerator that holds hostage an ice block the size of Antarctica. A costume made of shredded silver catering bladders and created by Noble’s fashion designer wife, Tina, is draped over a faded pink silk couch. It’s left over from a recent video shoot. It is in this studio that, you might imagine, the ghost of Andy Warhol

visits from time to time and nods approvingly at the chaos.

Noble gives a tour of his paintings that are in process or recently completed.

With media that include chalkboards, glass, stretched canvas and bed sheets, a common thread is certain: All of his paintings lure you in. Each piece has a story, and without fail each story is captivatingly told.

Today I am lucky enough to be the subject of two of his paintings. This of course makes me both giddy with excitement but also nervous. I’ve never been someone’s subject before. Noble calls one of the paintings a “vapor” painting and the second, a “membrane” painting.

MEMBRANE PAINTING

Membrane painting is aptly named for the manner in which the paint is pressed from behind and then pushed through to reveal the image on the front side of the portrait. “It’s like a cheesecloth, and surreal for those who witness the painting being pushed through from behind,” Noble says.

The membrane process uses a cotton bed sheet stretched across a wood frame. The sheet is permeable, and the artist is able to regulate what enters and exits that medium. When using oil paint in this manner, the droplets work their way through the membrane, making their final reveal to the audience more like a performance than a traditional painting.

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■ For membrane painting, Brad Noble pushes the paint from the back of the canvas and reveals it through the front by spraying paint thinner directly onto the canvas. If you're watching him work, the image seems to magically appear from behind.

Watching Noble work from behind his bed sheet canvas is somewhat akin to experiencing a magician pull a rabbit out of his hat. Upon a furious spray of turpentine applied to the bed sheet, suddenly the image appears. It is the spray of his mysterious elixir and the osmosis through the “membrane” that pulls the art through to the other side, revealing it to its audience. Although Noble’s work is not intended as performance art, the audience cannot help but internally applaud the feat: Art magically appears within moments. You almost expect him to exclaim, “Ta-dah!”

VAPOR PAINTING

The enormous eggshell-white vapor painting with china marker outlines of my face hovers almost ghost-like among Noble’s “Sea of Faces” work—an ongoing project to which Noble keeps adding faces. As if he’s in a relay race, Noble moves back and forth between this and

the membrane painting, wielding his pigment paint sticks and grey wall paint, as he fills up his water bottle with more turpentine.

The vapor painting had been “sealed” prior to our interview with an eggshell-white wall paint. My own image stares back at me. Noble seems hesitant. The wall paint that has been preselected the night before worries him.

“Wall paint can often work beautifully, or it can suck all the oil emulsion out of the painting,” Noble says. “But, this is part of the process of being an artist.”

He remarks that he doesn’t have certain colors on hand that he wishes to use. He is out of burnt sienna. Tina heads out to the only paint store in town that carries his beloved paint sticks in that particular color. They know to always have them in stock. Primarily for Brad Noble.

“The photograph that I took of you before today is there in my computer, as my model,”

Noble says. He continues explaining the vapor painting process. He starts with the super-sharp image that he captured with his camera of my face. Then, as he says, he will start blasting it out using the pressure of the brush. The rhythm of his brush strokes give off a final vapor painting image that often emulates a sleeping face lying peacefully under bath water or a girl waking up from a dream, creating what Noble calls a “hypnagogic state” or a “place between sleeping and waking. It wavers between hallucinogenic and completely lucid.”

“The vapor painting creates a quick and spontaneous creation,” he says. “I try not to inhibit my creativity, but that’s where you get into psychological games with yourself.”

NURTURING CREATIVITY

“Ten years of one show after another; it was getting old,” Noble says. “It was always, ‘What’s next? What’s next?’ It’s been two months, the



■ Brad Noble uses special pigment sticks (left) for most of his pieces. Below, Noble continues works on the ever-evolving vapor painting with a little help from his daughter.



longest time in a decade where I have had some downtime, and ideas are starting to come.”

“Is that part of the process, to build in downtime to allow for ideas to bubble up organically?” I ask.

“Now, I would say yes,” Noble says. “I was starting to feel like my work was getting contrived, which was almost depressing in itself. There is some planning that needs to happen for some pieces I want to do.”

Noble goes on to explain those projects: “I have some natural disaster paintings I want to do, too. Kind of like Gustav Klimt. He did some big epics. Alphonse Mucha did a Slavic epic series with these 20-foot-by-20-foot massive, powerful canvasses. There is a balance of blank space, and then war, and a building, and it’s just incredible. The goal would be to get into a scale that will really last and endure somewhere. I think that’s a goal that every artist would want.”

Noble says that he’s in the process of moving his work out to Los Angeles, to get himself back into that market again.

His cell rings, and it’s Tina. The paint store is not open yet. Noble says that he will have to work on the vapor painting at another time when he can get a hold of the colors he wants for the portrait. “The vapor painting is at 32-percent completion,” he jokes.

Noble continues to spray the turpentine and move the wall paint around the parameters of my canvassed face. He is clearly a fan of turpentine no matter what type of medium he uses.

TWO WEEKS LATER

I arrive back to the studio for the final reveal of the vapor painting. Noble apologetically informs me that the painting is not finished and that it is a process. “It’s going to inform me when it’s ready,” he says. Noble steps away and reveals the portrait of my face inlaid with an ar-

ray of light hues. From creams to beiges, whites and soft grey tones, the painting has taken on new life since my last visit. But despite a series of late nights, it is not ready.

He looks into my eyes and notices them. “Your eyes are golden,” he says. “Golden eyes.” He grabs a crayon and writes notes on the side of the canvas structure.

Watching Noble swarm around his canvas in the midst of the creative process transports you through the hypnotic rhythms of his brush strokes. On some esoteric level, you are seemingly drawn through the membrane of his bed sheet canvas to the land of surreal artistic inspiration.

As the afternoon unfolds, Noble continues to tell stories about his life, his process, his art—all while he fleshes out the image of my face. The vapor painting continues to come to life, and we wait for Noble’s painting to inform us when it’s ready.