

VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES

Press Release

John Sonsini

Watercolors

January 28 – March 11, 2023

Opening: January 28, 4 – 6PM



Vielmetter Los Angeles is pleased to present “John Sonsini: Watercolors”, the artist's first exhibition of watercolor paintings and his second solo exhibition with the gallery, running from January 28 to March 11, 2023. Sonsini has established himself as one of the foremost contemporary portrait painters working today. Alternating between studios in Southern California and Mexico he is most known for his expressive and politically charged portraits of Los Angeles Day Workers. During the height of the pandemic, Sonsini found himself sans live sitters and began an entirely new body of work, the process of which diverged from his practice spanning over four decades. Taking on the medium of watercolor,

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Sonsini has created a new series of insightfully detailed intimate paintings on a smaller scale from his oil portraits.

Interview with John Sonsini January 5, 2023:

JS: I'm very surprised to be doing a show of watercolors. Equally surprising to me is how a medium that I was not previously attracted to would suddenly become the focus of my attention.

VLA: When did you start using watercolors?

I started making the watercolors early on in the pandemic. Faced with a lengthy period of not being able to work with live sitters, and dissatisfied with painting from sketches, I looked to my paintings in public collections as a resource for my watercolor studies. But, in time, and as my fascination with the medium grew, it was less the imagery and far more the watercolor itself that pulled me in.

So, you hadn't used watercolors before?

It was a medium I had not spent much time looking at or considering. Back in 2019, when I was working on a multi-figured painting, I wanted to work out some color problems and I had watercolors at hand so I thought it would be an expedient way to deal with some color questions. I had some canvas boards lying around the studio, so I began using them for the watercolor and discovered that the watercolor and pencil performed marvelously together on this canvas surface which was entirely an accident and really pulled me into these mediums. Fast-forward to a year or so later, I was unable to have live sitters as I usually do and I wanted a project to get involved in so I picked up the watercolors with no intention of making a body of work at all and over that period of about a year I found myself using watercolor regularly and I noticed that the works were taking on a certain kind of presence for me that I was not expecting. They began as 'studies after' but were now completed works in their own right.

Watercolors are known to be a quick and temporal medium, different from oil paint which you usually use, what did you find to be the biggest differences in using watercolors?

I started tentatively I had thought it to be a very subtle medium. But that was an opinion not based upon using it but based upon seeing how certain other artists had used it. It always seemed to be about transparency and opacity, but almost immediately it struck me as a medium that was full of all

sorts of visceral possibilities that I'm familiar with in oil painting. Of course, once I felt that, then I was entirely engaged.

This series also complicates the idea of what is a completed work, what is a study 'from' and a study 'after', and the meaning of the value of the medium.

Being that I was never a painter that did studies 'for' my paintings, here I was in essence doing studies 'after' my oil paintings, working from completed paintings. That is certainly a shift in concept that has many interesting implications. The most significant, for me, being that I have always made my central work, my major work the oil paintings, which are (in addition to many things) a painted record of a social experience, the sitter, and the artist. Whereas the watercolors were the outcome of a solitary experience, me working off of my own painting. So that solitary thing already sets up a very unfamiliar and very new zone for me as an artist. It surprised me that I grew comfortable with all that time working alone. That's really not my comfort zone at all.

I think with playing with the value of watercolor and painting, in reality, is conceptually interesting as a ploy to probe the value between the two mediums, you are sort of flipping that on its head.

It's a mysterious zone when you do a study based on a finished painting. The reversal is not very customary for painters like me who paint from life. That final original product is given such a place of honor. It was interesting to place a solid year on this body of work in a new medium. Earlier in the pandemic, and with no live sitters, I had been painting from sketches and I was very dissatisfied with that way of working. It felt kind of pointless. So, I guess it's little wonder, that a new medium that I'd had no prior connection with would have such an impact on me.

It says something about the constraints that might propel one into exploring a new medium.

I don't think I'd ever have gotten so far into this new body of work without the experience of not being able to have live sitters. Painting from life, as I do with all my oil paintings, there are always numerous issues that are all about the sitter's presence. It's that presence, that immediacy of the relationship. The hand, of course, is there. The narrative, of course, that too is there. But, with the solitary activity of making the watercolors the primary issues were the narrative (because of scale) and the hand (because of the medium). They combined, in such a surprising way, to engage me in an unfamiliar way with my own paintings. For a painter, finding a new medium is like finding a new hand.

John Sonsini was born in Rome, NY in 1950 and received his BA from California State University Northridge in 1975. His work will be the subject of a book written by David Pagel and published by Radius Books forthcoming in 2024. Recent solo exhibitions include “A Day’s Labor: Portraits by John Sonsini,” Art Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA; and “Daywork: Portraits,” Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA. His work has been featured in group exhibitions at the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY; Tang Teaching Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY; Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, UT; the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, Stanford, CA; the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D. C. and at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. His work is in the public collections of the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA; AD&A Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA; Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA; Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica, CA; Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, NY; Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; The Frances Young Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY; Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, CA; Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY; McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; The Mulvane Art Museum, Washburn University, Topeka, KS; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County College, Overland Park, KS; Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, UT; Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA; Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA; The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; The Weatherspoon Museum, Greensboro, NC; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

The gallery is located at 1700 S Santa Fe Avenue, south of the 10 freeway. Parking is available on the south parking lot adjacent to the building. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am to 6 pm and by appointment. For further information and press inquiries, please contact Olivia Gauthier at Olivia@vielmetter.com.