

Patrick Philip Lee Explores Humanity Through Photorealistic Portraits

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Exploring Masculinity, Identity, And Humanity

Patrick Philip Lee's photorealistic portraits delve into identity, masculinity, and humanity, challenging societal perceptions while celebrating the complexity of his subjects through meticulous artistry and a deeply empathetic creative process.

Patrick Philip Lee is a masterful artist whose work transcends the boundaries of traditional portraiture, offering viewers an unflinching yet deeply empathetic exploration of humanity. Born in Butte, Montana, and now based in Los Angeles, Lee has built a career that spans drawing, photography, and sculpture, with his photorealistic portraits standing as a testament to his technical precision and emotional depth.

His art captures the raw, unvarnished essence of his subjects, often challenging societal perceptions of identity, masculinity, and marginalization. With exhibitions in prestigious institutions across the globe and works housed in major museum collections, Lee's contributions to contemporary art are both profound and enduring.

In this issue of WOWwART Magazine, we are thrilled to present an intimate conversation with Patrick Philip Lee, whose creative process is as meticulous as it is inspired. From his fascination with the stories etched into the faces of his subjects to his reflections on identity as a queer artist, Lee offers a rare glimpse into the mind of an artist who sees beauty in imperfection and humanity in complexity. His work is not just a mirror to society but a call to look deeper, to question, and to connect. This interview is a celebration of an artist who dares to see—and show—the world as it truly is.

"Patrick Philip Lee's art masterfully combines technical brilliance with emotional depth, offering profound insights into identity, humanity, and societal perceptions." – Editor, WOWwART

Editor: Your portraits often challenge viewers to question their perceptions. How do you decide on the subjects you portray, and what role does their personal story play in your creative process?



Omar, Wet Gang, York Ave., Highland Park, 2023, Graphite on paper, 40 x 30 inches

Patrick: I am drawn to faces that tell stories, to people with characteristics I find compelling that I see in my daily travails. I am fascinated by men whose lives and experiences are very different from my own. My goal is to depict their humanity even if their exterior is considered “dangerous” by society. Lately I have broadened my perspective by photographing and drawing inspiring people from my own life. I like to play with perceptions based on the viewer’s own judgments of people in my drawings informed by their ideas of wealth, class, and race that are reductive, boring and wrong.

Photorealism is a demanding technique. What draws you to this style, and how do you navigate the tension between technical precision and artistic expression?

Photorealism is an evolution of my drawing style since I was young. I am a perfectionist which is its own burden. When my subjects evolved from what was in my imagination to fairly strict portraiture, my drawings became more real and more detailed. It became a bit of an obsession to depict all of the character and scars, imperfections, tattoos that a subject has, satisfying my obsessive compulsive nature. I also wanted to create an intimacy in the drawings that might be impossible or uncomfortable for someone to have in person with the subject.

Your work often highlights the complexity of identity, particularly for marginalized individuals. How has your own experience as a queer artist influenced the themes and subjects of your art?

I have no idea what my artwork would look like if i was a straight man. All LGBT people have to confront their identities as young people and for me growing up in a small town in Montana in the 1980s, my passing as straight was a matter of survival. So the trappings of masculinity, the armor straight men wear to flex their power and strength to each other, has always fascinated me because it’s a language I learned as a youth. Because I’m gay, my inclination is to notice men more than women and I am often fascinated by their stories. If I can convey some of their demons, obstacles and triumphs in a face, then I have done something worthy.

Can you share more about your process of creating a portrait, from selecting a subject to the hours of labor involved in building textures and details?

My average photoshoot is often just a few minutes. I edit the photos and then decide which image is most impactful for me and is one I will want to spend days and months living with. Once I commit, it often takes 2-4 months to finish the drawing. I have developed drawing techniques over years to achieve different visual effects. The work is tedious and painstaking but towards the end, I get excited and usually the last week of each drawing is exhilarating when I’m hitting the level of detail and emotion I strive for. It’s like working on a puzzle for so long and finally seeing the entire picture coming together.

How do you see your art engaging with broader cultural or ethical issues in contemporary society?

I don’t consider myself a political artist but my work absolutely engages with the culture I see around me. I don’t judge the people I photograph. If they are an ex-con, I don’t ask them about their crimes or past. I interact with them in the moment as a human being. I try to treat everyone with respect and usually pay my subjects for their time. So much of our society is obsessed with images and signifiers of youth, beauty and privilege but those things are fool’s gold, they don’t make you happy. I do believe everyone deserves to have access to basic human needs in a country as rich as the United States and it’s painful to meet desperate people who have given up hope. My drawings are a mirror. I don’t believe in throwing people away.