

Interview

Portraits of Character



An Interview with Gary Mirabelle, Artist

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to becoming a well-known artist and following his formal art training, Gary Mirabelle (www.garymirabellestudios.com) modeled toy prototypes from clay and worked as a head sculptor for an architectural restoration firm. He also produced realistic special effects for low-budget feature films. Before this, he carried out a teaching assistantship from 1976 to 1978 at The Art Students League for sculpture and drawing. Mirabelle earned his bachelor of fine arts in 1976 from the State University of New York at New Paltz with a concentration in sculpture.



Gary Mirabelle

You've received prizes as a sculptor and a photographer, and you've gained a great deal of fame portraying people in both photography and sculpture. Do you have a favorite medium, or do you go from one to the other?

I go from one to the other. I think I'm fortunate in that I have the ability to work in different mediums. Versatility is really what an artist wants, because you can challenge yourself. You don't get stagnant in one area when you can do a couple of different things.

Executive portraits seldom have a real feel of character or personality, but your portraits bring out nice features. What is your technique?

My main concern is to have someone's character come out. I love digital photography, because I can take a lot of pictures, and I can look at them immediately. In the beginning, I click a lot of photographs, just to get the subjects to relax. And then they start to relax, and I get some natural expressions from them. I don't want to pose people; I want their body language to be their body language and their expressions to be their expressions. And then I talk to them and get a little idea of who they are. I shoot a lot of photographs, and then I go through them and pick a couple. I'll do a little bit of touch up, but I don't want to overdo it, because I want to



have all the character in there. I soften them a little bit, and then I have a nice portrait.

Can these portraits be used in annual reports?

Yes, I think that's something that people should consider, because there's no reason why there can't be a little artistry in the photograph. Why does it have to be boring? When people promote any sort of product in advertising, they always take an artistic approach to the presentation. So why shouldn't they have an artistic portrait?

You've had a tremendous amount of success at a young age. What advice would you give to those who want to go into art?

I would not delude anybody for a second. You're probably going to have to support yourself with a different kind of job. I was fortunate enough to work as a sculptor for other people for years. I was then able to make some connections and make the transition to being a fine artist on my own. But you need luck and timing, you have to develop your skills, and you have to be absurdly dedicated to it. A lot of times there's a great cost involved. I did not start making any money as an artist until I was 40 years old. In any other field I would have been off and running with a good income at that age. So you have to really love it, and the money has to be a secondary part of why you do it.

Do you recommend that an aspiring artist go to school? If so, where would that person start after coming out of school?

You don't have to, but I think a good art education is very valid and will help to get your foundation established. After you get out, if you can go to work for another artist or work in a business where your skills as an artist are being tapped into, that's what you try to do. Obviously, if you come out as a painter, you don't want to go work in an office, but if you can go work as a graphic artist for a magazine

or something similar, at least your skills are being tapped into. I think that's more of the way to go. But try to keep it related. And keep pushing. You are trying to get into the galleries. Put your work together. It takes a long time to put a body of work together. You have to be unique. You have to stand out, and you have to push.

And every once in a while you stumble upon a Picasso?

I think some people are brilliant at promoting themselves. That's their skill, and they get a niche and just go with it. A lot of contemporary artists are doing that now. Some are just so incredibly good. You see their work, and you are just blown away by it.

As you were becoming successful in art, you must have felt discouraged and thought things would never work out. How did you overcome those feelings?

I think I've been really fortunate, but I have had periods where I'm not selling as well. You may lose some galleries. You may lose some commissions. But it's always about the work. The work is always there. You just continue to make more art. That's really what it's about.

That's easy for you to say, because you own your own studio, your own building, and everything else.

But even before then, it was always about the artwork. There are always ways to do it. You work within your realm, work with what you have. If you can't afford a big space, then work in a small space.

You never have to retire as an artist, no matter how old you get. Do you ever intend to retire, or are you going to keep working?

I'm going to keep working. That's what I love doing. I think the nice thing about being financially sound is it gives me the luxury of just pursuing things. I can go after something that I want to do without having to worry about making money. I'm always thinking about projects. There are just not enough hours in the day to do everything. I was painting for a while. I have sculpture projects I want to jump back into. And I'm pursuing photography now. I'm just loving it. ●

Portraits by Gary Mirabelle