

Vilas Tonape

A prizewinning self-portrait compels the artist to look inward and reflect on his student-becomes-teacher fortune.

By Jessica Canterbury

When Vilas Tonape, of Lakeland, Fla., talks about art, something happens to him, which is evident even over the telephone: His already high-energy speech picks up speed, and its volume increases a few notches. “Art has given me a real passion about things,” he says. “There is something burning inside me, and it’s so delightful, so fun, so beautiful.”

About the Artist

Vilas Tonape was born in India, and moved to the United States in 1994. His work has appeared in exhibitions throughout the U.S. and in Mumbai. Tonape is a professor of art at Polk Community College in Winter Haven, Fla., and teaches a summer enrichment program for Texas art educators during breaks. He is represented by Sotlej Art Gallery, in New York City, and Infusion Gallery, in Los Angeles. See more of his work at www.vilastonape.com.

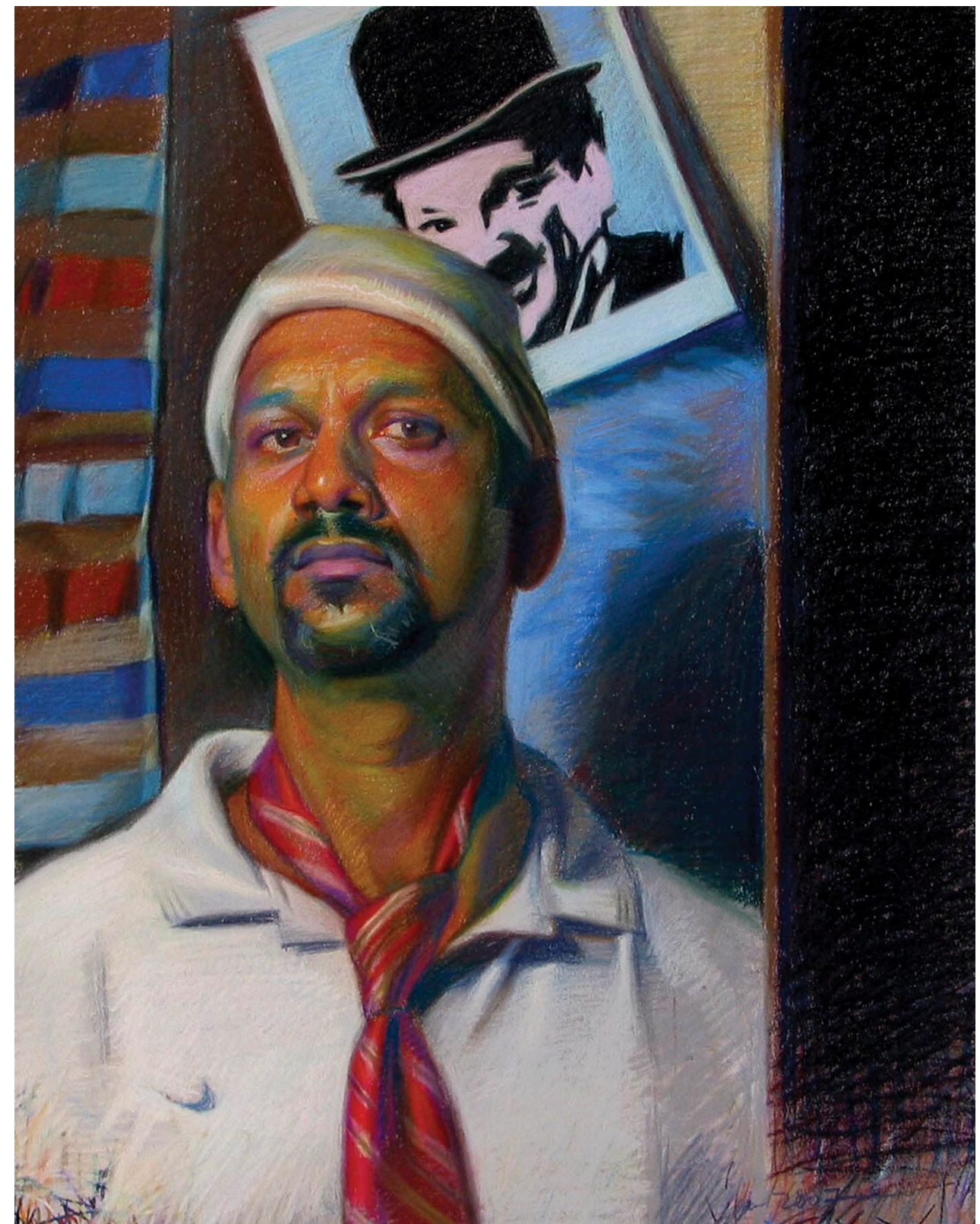


Art is something Tonape equates with the other loves of his life—women, nature, cooking—and it’s a relationship he’s nurtured since early childhood. He remembers that he was first hooked as far back as fifth or sixth grade. “I was so attracted to paint and pencil and all the art supplies,” he says. “And I remember seeing some black-and-white movie—I was maybe 11 or 12—where the lead actor was an artist and he drew a picture of the actress. It wasn’t like a step-by-step, but it was so fascinating to me as a kid. So it was like an attraction, and I don’t know quite how that works. It’s like a high school sweetheart.”

The artist has pursued this love his entire life, earning his BFA in drawing and painting with distinction from the University of Bombay’s Sir J.J. School of Art (a rigorous five-year program with two years of foundation courses). He then moved to the United States in 1994 for a full graduate scholarship to Texas Christian University, where he also served as a teaching assistant. Since then, he’s been an instructor at the Armory Art Center in West Palm Beach, Fla.; a visiting artist at Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Fla.; a professor at Savannah College of Art and Design; and is now settled as an art professor at Polk Community College in Winter Haven, Fla.

The Story of Pastel

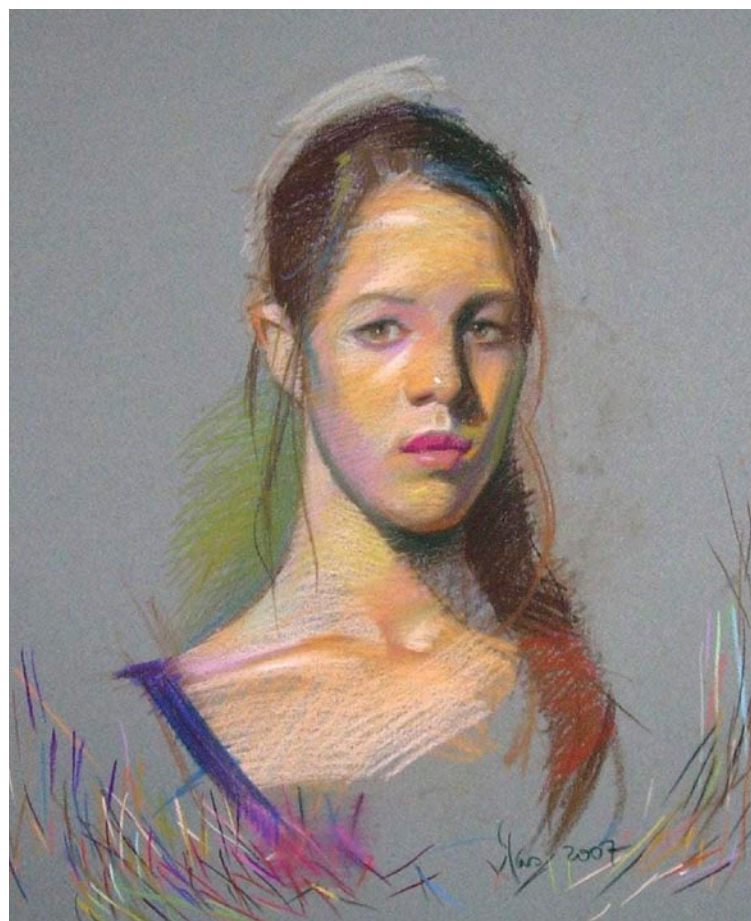
Although the artist is well versed in several other media—acrylic, watercolor, oil, graphite—Tonape didn’t discover pastel until about seven years ago, when he was living in West Palm Beach. The artist’s late older brother, who was living in India at the time, sent Tonape a few photographs of a pastel demonstration by Anil Naik, one of Tonape’s former art professors.



Interview (24x19)

“The moment I opened that envelope and saw those photos, I got in the car, went straight to the art supply store, bought a box of pastels and started that same night, working until 3 in the morning; I did two self-portraits,” says Tonape. “That’s the kind of impact it had on me.”

Tonape feels very fortunate to have had such excellent art instructors, and it’s because of them that he’s just as passionate about education as he is about art. “Every stroke I make on paper with a pastel is a gift from my teachers,” he says, and then goes on to explain an Indian scripture about the sacredness of wisdom. “There are three important entities in our life: one is God, one is parents, and the third is teacher. The teacher is always higher than God and the parents, because, according to the scriptures, the teacher is the only one between the three who has the facility to put you on the right path. He is the only one who can give you wisdom. Therefore, whatever you receive from a teacher, it’s not something that you just pay a tuition for and you buy. It’s a gift.”



Taylor’s Gaze (24x19)

Looking Inward

Tonape’s classical training shows through in his paintings, especially his portrait and figure work. Often-times the artist’s portraits are conceptual as well as anatomically precise. His award-winning painting, *Interview* (on page 27), for example, is a self-portrait with an unusual narrative. “When I put this hat on, I looked like someone you see on the street at night, an urban dweller,” says the artist. “I thought I’d wear a tie, because that’s the usual thing that people wear when they’re going for an interview, but I’m not wearing a collared shirt, so it’s a different kind of interview. It’s an interview to get in the gang, so to speak. It’s so funny that an Indian guy wants to get in a gang, and that fun part is represented by another person with a hat, Charlie Chaplin.

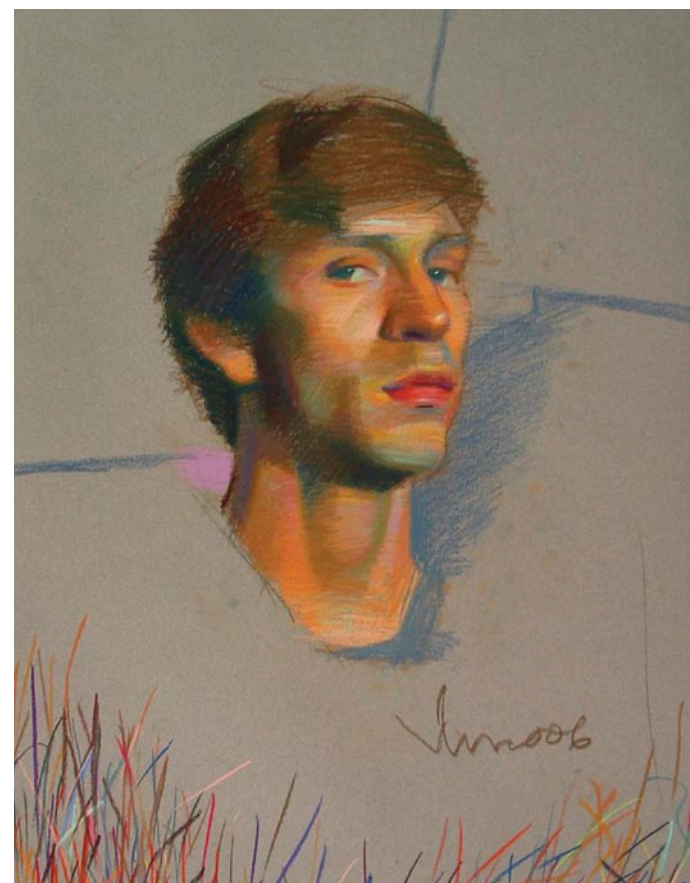
“He’s kind of laughing at the guy, like, ‘Are you kidding me? This hood is not for you,’ or something like that. It’s like an oxymoronic thing,” says Tonape. The narrative is an important element in his work. “I have to have some kind of story, because if I don’t have a story, all I’m left with is the same boring face to paint.”

Tonape credits his strong grasp of anatomy to his undergraduate foundation studies. He likens understanding the basics of drawing to language. “It’s like having a strong grasp of grammar so that you can create poems however you want,” he says. “The problem is that everybody wants to make poems, but nobody wants to study the grammar, because it’s a tedious process, number one. Number two, it takes time, and people don’t want to take the time.” Taking the time, he says, allows artists to understand how to see shapes with their eyes instead of their minds, which enables them to become better painters across any genre, any medium.

The Painting Principle

Tonape can create a striking pastel in 30 to 40 minutes, if he’s demonstrating for a class, or sometimes upwards of 20 hours for a more refined, developed painting. He works on Canson Mi-Teintes paper, in either moonstone or steel gray, and uses Nupastels and maybe a pastel pencil for specific details. While preliminary sketching is no longer a part of his routine, he does employ some pre-planning. “I take a couple of browns and do a sepia drawing, like a *grisaille*. And I’ll start from there and work from dark to light,” he says.

The artist doesn’t favor any one medium. “Each medium has its own beauty, and limitations,” he says. “I think that people have missed the principle of painting:



Kenyon (24x19)

The way dirt sticks on the canvas will be different than the way watercolor sticks on the canvas and the way oil sticks on the canvas,” says Tonape. He describes how he learned the principle in terms of a tree. “Instead of trying to understand the leaves, small branches, big branches, trunk, the fruits from the tree, instead of trying to learn all these things separately, they simply taught me about the roots. Because everything springs from that principle root: shape.

“Once you understand the root of the technique, you don’t have to separately understand each and every medium. Of course, to understand all of this, it takes time,” he says.

Digging Deep

It’s very clear the impact education has had on the artist—professionally, creatively and philosophically—and its continuing role in Tonape’s life. In addition to his current position as a college art instructor, he also teaches at a summer enrichment program that he co-founded in 2007—a pastel portrait workshop, no less—with Texas Christian University (TCU) for local art educators. The program has proven to be such a success that it was included as part of the programming in a \$350,000 grant between TCU and the Fort Worth



Chin (24x19)

Independent School District, and this summer Tonape will teach an additional workshop in portraiture.

Tonape recalls a life-changing experience that sums up his own teaching philosophy. While studying art in India, the artist found himself wandering between styles and subjects. His teacher compared his restlessness to a treasure hunt. “He said, ‘I know you’re trying to find a treasure; you’re digging a hole. But the problem is you’re digging only a couple of feet, quitting, and moving on to a different area, but you’re not digging deep enough,’” says Tonape. “He went on to say, ‘If you want to find it, you have to dig deep enough, but when you do, you’ll find that there is no treasure to be found. When you dig deep enough, treasure won’t matter,’ he said, ‘because you’ll have learned the meaning of depth, and that’s the treasure.’ That changed my life right there—the idea of sticking to it, digging deep. That’s what education has done to me, and that’s what I try to teach my students.”

Jessica Canterbury is managing editor of *The Pastel Journal* and *Watercolor Artist*.

See Tonape’s honorable mention in the *Portrait & Figure* category on page 60.