

CELESTIAL COLOR

VILAS TONAPE paints complex still lifes and powerful portraits that glow with striking color and are rendered with meticulous clarity. BY JOHN A. PARKS

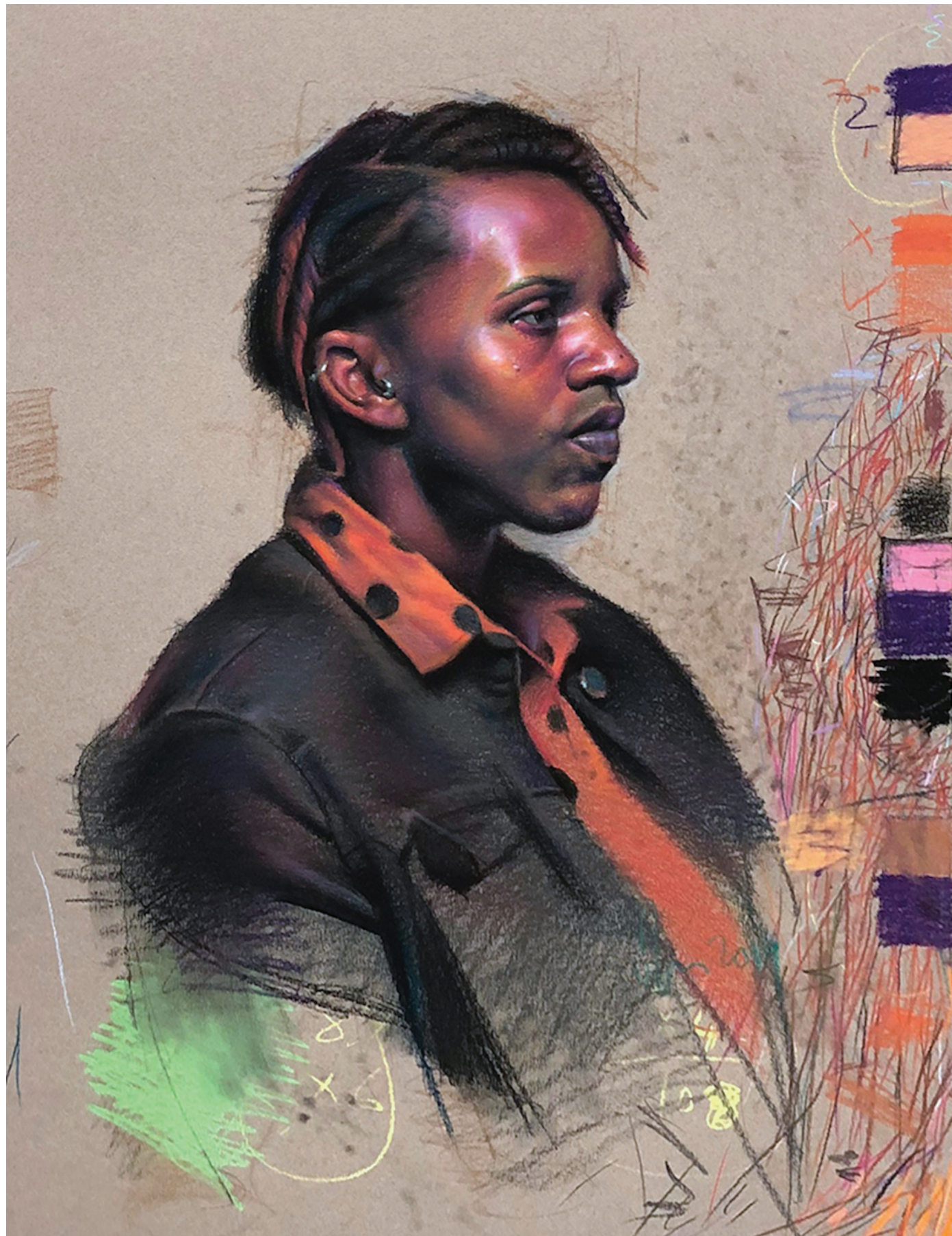
SOME ARTISTS STRIVE TO ACHIEVE EVERYTHING IN their paintings, combining perfectly rendered form with rich, vibrant color and intriguing imagery to make finished work that's expressive, mysterious and eloquent. So it is with Vilas Tonape, a North Carolina-based artist whose subjects often include densely colored combinations of silks, satins and other fabrics with curious additions like

musical instruments and antique casts of body parts, along with traditional props like fruit, bottles, jars and pots. His portraits generally feature strong directional lighting to create dramatic tonal contrasts along with an extraordinary range of color. Sometimes he

ABOVE
Backstory
(pastel, 19x25)

OPPOSITE
Musicology IV
(pastel, 25½x19½)





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— Vilas Tonape

combines the two, surrounding a sitter with a grouping of props to create provocative and mysterious associations.

The results in all cases are resplendent and authoritative, almost as though the artist has said the last word it’s possible to say on his subject— and yet has also added something indefinable, an atmosphere that emanates from the unique color choices that he makes.

“With color you have to begin with exaggeration,” says Tonape. “You can’t arrive at the correct color right away, at the beginning of a work, because the context isn’t there. So you begin with something a little exaggerated.” As the painting proceeds, Tonape goes through a process of color elaboration, exploring range and variety. Gradually, he proceeds towards a condition of near-replication, but

stops short of actually replicating the image. “You reach a moment where something special happens,” Tonape says. “There’s a point where there’s a celestial experience of color that’s dancing, vibrant and beautiful. That’s when I stop. Sometimes I don’t succeed. I’ve never quite achieved the benediction from painting that I’m looking for. When I have my ‘Mona Lisa,’ then I’ll quit painting.”

Still Life

The artist begins his still life paintings by selecting and organizing his props, a practice that has grown from his years of teaching at Methodist University. “The fact that I’ve painted so much still life is really the result of



LEFT
Three Is a Crowd
(pastel, 19x19)

IN THE PERMANENT
PUBLIC COLLECTION AT
COLQUITT COUNTY ARTS
CENTER, GEORGIA.

OPPOSITE
Ishimwe
(pastel, 24x18)

A LESSON FOR A PRESIDENT



One of the highlights of Tonape's teaching career occurred in 2018 when he received a call from an unusual prospective student, former President George W. Bush. After he left office, Bush took up painting, choosing portraiture as his main subject and concentrating on making paintings of veterans. He sought advice from various artists, and one of the people he worked with, Jim Woodson, suggested he consult Tonape. "Bush had been painting people from photographs, but he wanted to start working from life," says the artist. "Jim had told him how I was an ex-student of his and showed him some of my YouTube videos. Bush liked them and told him to invite me. So one day I get a call. I just couldn't believe it. The funny thing was that as soon as I recognized who it was, I stood up. I remained standing through the whole 25-minute phone call without realizing it."

Tonape says that he has little interest in politics and hadn't been a citizen when Bush was president. He simply felt honored to be invited. "It was a lengthy process," he recalls. "I had been called in September, but it wasn't until February that the President's manager called back. Then I heard from the Secret Service, who had to perform a background check. What surprised me the most was when I received a call two weeks before my visit asking me what I would like to have for lunch."

Tonape travelled to Bush's studio and spent a whole day with him. "I went through my usual lesson," he says, "although I was a bit nervous to begin with. Bush was easy-going and funny, so I was pleasantly surprised. And the former first lady was extremely gracious." At the end of the day, Tonape was surprised when Bush insisted on washing the artist's brushes for him. "I tried to stop him, but he insisted," he recalls. "It was very touching." The two men talked of spending another day together, but the Covid pandemic intervened. The artist hopes the lessons will resume at some time in the future.

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circumstance,” he says. “The university doesn’t offer figure painting classes, so I find myself setting up a lot of still life instead.” Inspired by his work with students, he struck out on his own, taking advantage of the traditional benefits of still life painting: stable light, stable subject matter and complete control of iconography.

Tonape usually works on a piece of gray Canson paper. He first draws the basic shapes in the composition with a brown Prismacolor pastel reinforced by a black charcoal pencil. Then, he builds the tonal areas in the same colors, using a cross-hatched line to develop the main shadows to form a simple grisaille rendering.

Next comes the application of color, starting with somewhat exaggerated versions of the local color. Again,

he tends to lay the color in with a cross-hatched line, an approach that allows him to build in more variation with the next layer. While the early stages are relatively simple, there now follows a long process of elaboration during which the artist augments both color and tone in numerous passes across the painting.

The artist uses hard pastels, having found that soft pastels don’t allow for the close control of form he’s after. “I sharpen my pastels with a blade all the time,” he says, citing the need for precision when it comes to placing fine detail.

The artist avoids blending early in the painting although he’ll sometimes use a touch of his finger to fill a hole. Any blending toward the end of the process

is delicate and limited, as he knows the importance of keeping the colors separate and active. Final details are achieved with numerous tiny touches of the pastel.

Tonape doesn’t use fixative, having found that it changes the work too much. If this leaves the piece somewhat vulnerable, then he’s philosophic about it. “It’s true that unfixed work changes with time,” he says, “but I’m comfortable with that. Decay and deterioration are part of life. If you’re so good that your artwork is eventually purchased by a museum, then preserving the work will become their problem.”

Portraits

Tonape follows a similar procedure with his portraits, placing the major shapes with brown line reinforced with black charcoal pencil and then massing the main tonal areas. He’s not afraid to exaggerate the shadow colors when painting flesh and to leave them very saturated in the finished work, an approach that endows his sitters’ images with an almost otherworldly shimmer.

The results of his approach can be seen in *Banjo* (left) a recent work in which an old banjo shares the stage with an animal skull and various jars, books and fabrics. Color sings throughout the piece as a wide range of saturated local hues along with a couple of pieces of iridescent fabric create something of an inner glow throughout the whole work. Even the bleached skull reflects brilliant oranges and blues.

Early Career

It may be that the chromatic wealth as well as the mysterious warmth and depth of the artist’s work owes something to Tonape’s background in his native India. “My origins are fairly humble,” he says. “I was the first member of my family to go to college. My parents were thrilled. I wanted to study art, and that was fine with them.”

Tonape gained admittance to the prestigious Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai, where his strength in the entrance exams secured him a scholarship. It’s an achievement he remains proud of, and his pride extends to the school and the caliber of its training. “The very first principal of the school was Lockwood Kipling, the father of Rudyard Kipling. In fact, the writer was actually born there,” he says.



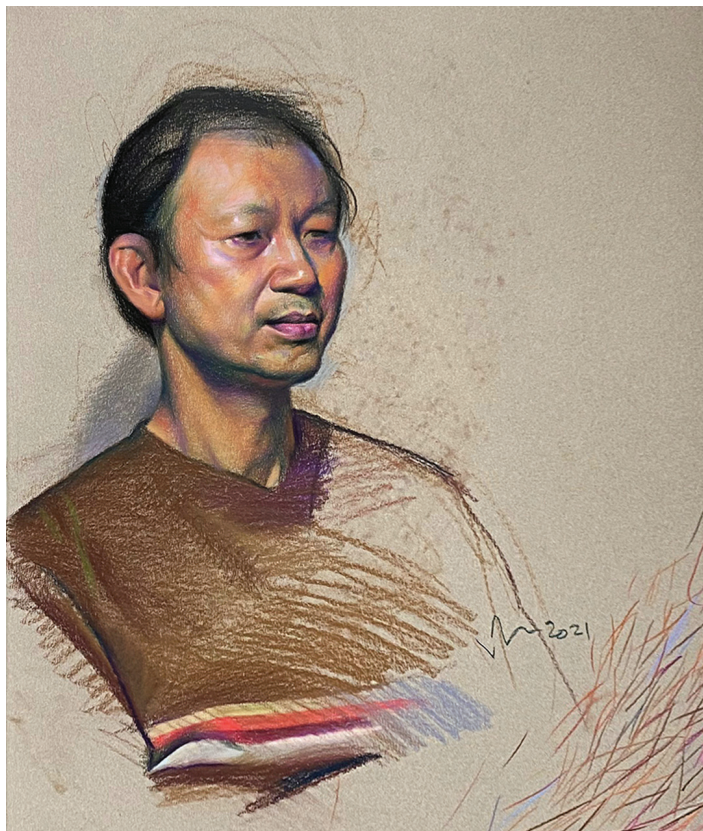
The artist exaggerated the shadows and used a range of saturated local color to create an otherworldly glow in *Banjo* (pastel, 24x18).

OPPOSITE
Drunk Detective
(pastel, 25x19½)

RIGHT
Professor Math
(pastel, 21x15)

BELOW LEFT
Thinking Lady
(pastel, 23x17)

BELOW RIGHT
Anna
(pastel, 23x17)

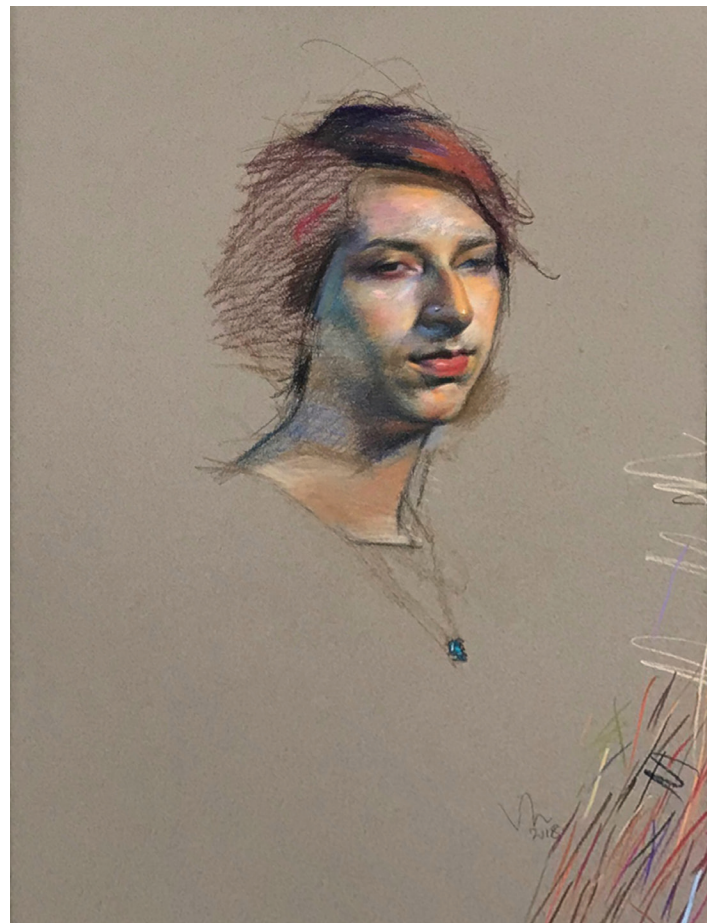


The rigorous training Tonape received extended over five years. With an initial focus on drawing, the program resembled a classical European art education with an emphasis on traditional representational work. After graduating with honors, Tonape decided to further his studies abroad when he was offered a scholarship by Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth.

Current Trends

Tonape's student work was largely in oil and watercolor, but he began to explore pastels in the years after college—and fell in love with them. It's easy to see why, since pastels offer the ability to combine the artist's powerful drawing skills with highly active color.

Although Tonape has focussed on his representational works in pastel in recent years, he has also produced a body of abstract paintings in



Vilas Tonape (vilastonape.com) was born in India and studied at the Sir J.J. School of Art, University of Mumbai, where he received an undergraduate degree. He completed an M.F.A. at Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth, and then pursued a career in teaching and painting, which included stints as a visiting artist at Savannah College of Art and Design, in Savannah, Ga., and Ringling College of Art and Design, in Sarasota, Fla. His work has been widely exhibited, including venues in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Mumbai and Canada. He has won many awards and honors including the Grand Prize and an Honorable Mention in the 10th Annual Pastel 100 in *Pastel Journal* in 2008. He's currently the chair of the art department at Methodist University, in Fayetteville, N.C.

acrylics. This is a radically different enterprise: paintings in which grids, marks and swatches of color overlap in a shallow pictorial space. "In my art training, I was taught that classical art isn't necessarily only representational," explains the artist. "A similar canon also exists with abstract art. It's based on geometry, composition and balance." Asked how he can pursue such different ventures, Tonape laughs and says the question is like being asked if you can only love one family member. "Can you be asked to love your mother but not your sister?"

The scope and range of Tonape's work is all the more remarkable when we consider that he's the chair of a college art department with all the responsibilities that come with it. He finds time to produce his paintings by keeping a studio both at home and at the school. Evenings,

weekends and vacations are all dedicated to painting. In the summer, he returns to India to teach and give workshops, eager to train and encourage a new generation of Indian artists.

Indeed, passion and exuberance seem to be the driving forces of Tonape's artistic life. Talking of his own work, he says: "My quest is this interaction of color, meaning that, like a bouquet of flowers, there's a bouquet of colors in the still life that's so beautiful, that 'smells,' as it were, so beautiful. I want to create that bouquet and dance in it, and hopefully a couple of other people will be able to smell it too." **PJ**

John A. Parks is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty at the School of Visual Arts, in New York.