A portrait of Lori Isom, a Black woman with short, curly grey hair, wearing a yellow tank top. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

12 Questions for Lori Isom

Photography by Ashley Concannon

JASPER: You are such an exquisite portraitist, but we love your paintings of other subjects as well. What is the difference in the kind of satisfaction you personally receive from these two different types of art?

ISOM: I'm assuming you're asking about my figurative art versus portraits, since capturing people pretty much covers what I do. Occasionally, I may add a structure in the background, like a building, or objects in a room, but I usually try to keep them understated. I prefer to focus on the emotion of the piece, even if it's through the subject's body language in the case of a figurative painting. Between the two, I would have to say that portraiture is the most satisfying to me because each face has its unique characteristics. I love the challenge of bringing that uniqueness to life, particularly in the eyes.

JASPER: When creating a portrait what are your essential needs?

ISOM: The biggest requirement for me is good lighting! I say this first because proper lighting is usually the biggest issue that I have to deal with. As with most artists, ideal

lighting for me is natural daylight. Besides that, I just really need to have things orderly and within reach. Some good music or favorite podcast is a plus!

JASPER: What are your favorite subjects to paint?

ISOM: My favorite subjects to draw/paint are women. I enjoy drawing the softer edges and curves that women have. When I'm drawing a man, I do have to fight against the tendency to make them look a bit feminine at first. I also really enjoy capturing children.

JASPER: You studied at Parsons School of Design. What is the most important lesson you learned while there?

ISOM: Mmm...Parsons was a long time ago! I suppose I'd have to say that getting a strong foundation in drawing the figure from life was the most important thing for me. We drew people from all walks of life, and those sessions were instrumental in helping us to learn how to really see. This is one of the primary things that I emphasize when I'm teaching - draw what you see, not what you think you see!

JASPER: You also enjoyed a more than two-decade career as a performing artist. Tell us about that.

ISOM: Well, I had to switch gears two years into attending Parsons, as I could no longer afford it. I'd been taking dance classes for a while and decided that I would take advantage of this "opportunity." I began taking voice and acting lessons and was fortunate enough to be cast in several plays and musical theater productions, as well as a hand full of tv commercials and industrial videos.

JASPER: You were actually in some music videos – Details, please!

ISOM: I really only did a couple of music videos, one was for a song called "Let the Beat Hit 'Em" by Lisa Lisa and the Cult Jam, and the other was for a remake of the Bill Withers' song "Use Me" performed by Aaron Neville.

JASPER: Any other celebrity connections or brushes with greatness we should know about?

ISOM: Quite a few of the people I hung out with when I lived in L.A. were up and coming in the industry and went on to have pretty decent careers. I did get to meet Will Smith after the taping of the final episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Aire*, through a friend of mine who had been cast for the show. Those were good times.

JASPER: Tell us the story behind your painting of the little girl in the green dress, please.

ISOM: The painting "Public Housing" is an homage to the projects I lived in as a child called the Pink Houses, in Brooklyn NY. A lot of people think of public housing as a crime ridden, unkempt place where kids pretty much raise themselves. That wasn't the case for us growing up. Parents had to take care of their children, maintain spotless apartments, and show proof of stable employment, as these things were monitored by the housing authority. My friends and I played outside all day long and didn't go inside unless we had to use the bathroom or until it got dark.

JASPER: Whose work would you most love to have hanging on your own wall, but don't – and why?

ISOM: There are so many artists whose work I would love to own if I could afford it! My favorite watercolor artists Mary Whyte and Dean Mitchell, artist and illustrator Kadir Nelson, Amy Sherald who painted Michelle Obama's portrait, local artist and teacher Tyrone Jeter, and one of the most influential artists for me, Mary Cassatt.

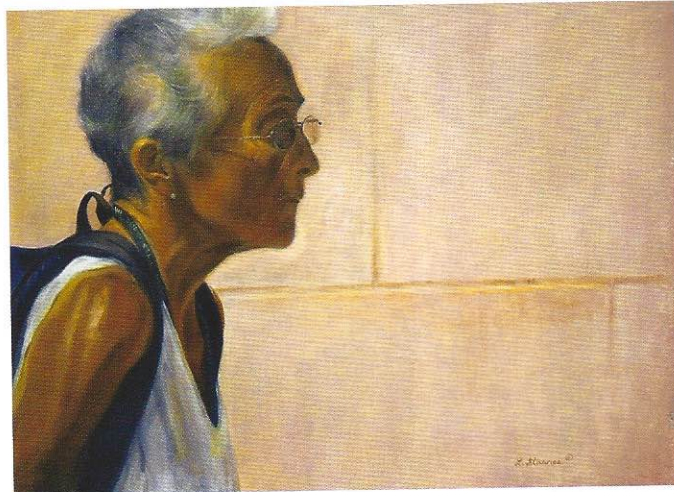
JASPER: Where can we next see your art in person?

ISOM: 2020 and 2021 have been pretty busy for me, artistically speaking. My work has been included in a few group exhibitions, one of which is happening right now at the Richland Public Library on Assembly Street. I've been working really hard on producing several large pieces for a new gallery opening on DeKalb Street in Camden this September. I'll also have a studio in the gallery where I'll be able to do portrait sittings as well as portraits from photos, so I'm really looking forward to it.





BEACH DWELLERS, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 18 X 24"



FORWARD, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 22 X 30"

All life's a stage

Lori Starnes Isom's deep desire as an artist is to represent her subject in the most honest and sincere way.

"I'm not interested in painting pretty pictures. I simply want to tell the story, with no frills—just the information necessary to do so," says Starnes Isom. "I favor interesting composition over color, although I do enjoy experimenting with color."

Starnes Isom is attracted to the work of artists who are highly skilled in technique and in capturing a moment. She finds inspiration in a wide range of realist painters like Mary Cassatt, Andrew Wyeth, Daniel Greene, Mary Whyte, Dean Mitchell and Jeremy Lipking, to name a few.

"Although I do not try to imitate, I know that my work is greatly influenced by what I admire," she says. "Even though I'll paint any subject, I am pretty much addicted to painting people. Like many other artists, I love showing people at ease in their natural settings."

With her theatrical background, Starnes Isom often relates painting a picture to a writer writing a script.

"I enjoy revealing my 'characters' personalities, and giving my 'audience' a glimpse into their lives. I suppose this is why out of all of the photographs that I take, the ones that inspire paintings are the ones in which the subject seems to have a story that must be told," says Starnes Isom. ●



FOUR LITTLE GIRLS, ACRYLIC AND GROUND MEDIUM, 16 X 20"

LORI STARNES ISOM
REPRESENTED BY
 Olde Towne Art
 525 High Street
 Portsmouth, VA 23704
 (757) 673-2667
www.oldetowneart.com

Price Range Indicator

Our at-a-glance Price Range Indicator shows what you can expect to pay for this artist's work.

	Small	Medium	Large
2009	\$900-\$1,200	\$1,400-\$1,800	\$2,000-\$5,000