

Marcia Marcus

As Told To Walter Gutman
circa 1966

“The experience of posing for Marcia Marcus was unspeakable,” spoke Lucas Samaras. He spoke this to Marcia when she asked him what it was like. He posed for her three times. Each time resulted in what I would call a great portrait, one of which he liked, and two he hated.

My own experience posing for Marcia was very agreeable for one thing, Marcia likes to paint to rock and roll, and for another, she provides wine, and when her husband Terry is around, you get a very good lunch. And then I turned out much better looking than I would have if I had done it myself.

Whatever the experience of posing, there is a high probability, though not a certainty, that it will result in a fine and possibly even a great portrait.

There is, of course, another point of view—that of the artist looking at one who poses. Most of those Marcia paints are artists, usually her friends, and she feels that they make the best models, because they understand the problems. One of her favorite models was Myron Stout.



Myron Stout, 1965
Oil on canvas
Dimensions unknown
Private collection, New York

She approached him with great deference even though she had known him for a decade and a half because she appreciated the intensity with which he works on his extraordinary paintings and drawings, some of which take five to seven years of persistent work before they become to completion, but he was an unusually generous model, sometimes posing four hours at a time five times a week for two and a half weeks when Marcia stayed in Provincetown after the social scene was over and such projects were possible.

After Marcia did the painting of me, which is currently on loan in the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, a museum which is noted

for American dramatic portraiture of the Colonial and Federalist periods, I wrote Marcia as follows:

Your portrait passed the acid test – namely, Suki, my daughter. She didn't expect anything like this. In fact, no one else did except those who know you. It seems to me that you may reestablish the tenets of grand portraiture in which the personal element, which distinguishes portraiture from other painting, exists but the abstract element, which can make a portrait into a painting, exists also.

While posing, I extracted some views on art. Once she said: *Take Courbet's painting of his studio. The exaggerated pose of the painter, his paintings and models around – well that's cornball if you take it as subject and overly sentimental, but with such passion that he carries you past sentimentality to love. The intensity – the power is visual – it's just there – you don't think – you feel – as you do about many things – you don't think about a sunset, you are astounded, glad to be there. Art is really a moral thing – a reminder of what you are capable of – in pure form – you stand before a great painting and you sort of receive your feelings without overlay. I don't believe in the 'cool' attitude, which, in theory anyway, believes in making objects which you don't exactly look at but which exert a kind of votive force. Art is absolutely human – there is nothing mystic about it.*

Though Marcia paints people mostly, her work includes paintings of flowers and landscapes.

I asked Marcia what she liked about flowers. *"I like them when they are definite – roses – I like certain sorts of roses," I asked her which ones. "I don't know what kind, what their names might be. It's a quality they have of being very definite, having a personality like that rose in the painting of Terry and me. I don't know what variety it was, but it was a great flower. Really the only flowers I like are roses."*



Double Portrait a.k.a. Double Portrait with Helmet, 1965
Oil on canvas
Dimensions unknown
Private collection

It seems to me, however, that she had done other flowers. *"Haven't you painted mimosa?" I asked. "Yes, I like that too. I like the shapes it takes. Like my mad purple plant, which appears over and over.*



Still Life with Mimosa,
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
Private Collection, Washington, D.C.



Plant, 1966
Oil on canvas
25 x 25 inches
Private collection, Washington D.C.

I like the same things in flowers as in people – I choose a model because there is presence, whether for good or evil. I choose very different people for models, but they are all strong personalities – Lucas, Big Ray, Barbara Forest, you, Myron, Mimi and Red Grooms, Henry Getzahler, Dodie Muller, Jill Johnson are all very different, but they create strong visual images for me. It doesn't matter whether a painter is non-objective minimal – whatever that is – pop or op – there had to be that initial turning on about or from something, a feeling of color, dunes, painting itself, anything, or you'd end up lying on the beach all day, which isn't a bad idea either. Some victims have objected to my view of them, and I've been startled sometimes myself to see the finished painting out of the studio, and therefore as if someone else had done it, and a penetration into personality or psychology that I certainly never intended. I'm absolutely anti-expressionism (i.e. the Soutine, not the de Kooning variety, which is really abstract and about painting). You can't avoid showing an attitude, so why aim for the inevitable."

One of Marcia's most definite contributions to painting is her extraordinary collages - which only appear occasionally. Another is her use of gold and silver leaf as color. The Renaissance painters, especially the earlier ones, and a matter of fact, the Byzantines, use gold foil copiously, but not much has been done with it since. It's quite a problem to paint against something as strong surface-wise and as homogeneously brilliant as gold or silver – and in many practical accomplishments, the question isn't whether it is desirable or whether it works. When Marcia uses leaf it doesn't overwhelm the painting as it easily might – it

works somehow. In one of her paintings, which was done on the Provincetown Dunes, she first had the sea and dunes working against the personality of the man (Lucas). It didn't work. So she left it. It was no longer a landscape as a background for a strongly painted man; it worked. This is one of the ones that Lucas hated.



Lucas in the Dunes, 1965
Oil on canvas with gold leaf
53 x 35 in.
Private collection, New York

In a painting of Anthony Muto, a young designer with whom she trades paintings for clothes, a leaf pattern on the 'floor' is primarily a decorative detail.

Obviously, what makes something as arbitrary as gold or silver leaf work for Marcia is an involvement with the scene. This is true of her collages, too, some of which are truly fantastic. In my portrait, the collage is made up of almost hundreds of clippings from Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, and Life - heads of beautiful women - lips - elegant fingers - A lion, A cherub, words - an athlete - an extraordinary melange. It



Anthony
Oil on canvas with silver leaf
72 x 30 inches
Private collection, New York

would be so easy for something like this to be cute - it isn't - it not only supports the central figure but makes it more important. I asked her what she thought about when she made a collage - what its purpose was:

"The collage element is chosen instinctively, the same way as a model, i.e. visually first, content second - it feels right when I see it, I change it for the same reasons as any other part of the painting as I work. I prefer Vogue and Bazaar because the photographs are generally clear; I hate shadows. The collage meant something about you but it also meant something about me and art in general - the collage isn't an editorial about you - it's some sort of association at the moment - it can't be explained anymore than a color can be, but still it can be read literally the way the color or a form or the gesture of a form can have meaning beyond the artists original visual intention. But secondly, after the fact. The painting is the fact."



Walter Gutman, 1965
Oil on canvas, collage
68 × 50 in.
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Gift of Walter K.
Gutman, Class of 1924. Accession Number 1966.92

Source: Walter, Gutman. "Marcia Marcus as told to Walter Gutman," circa 1966. James Graham & Sons records, 1821. Series 3: Artists' Files, circa 1907-2006, Box 47, Folder 27, Marcus, Marcia, 1965-1967. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C.