



# THE QUIET POWER OF ELLEN EAGLE

Editor's Note: We were delighted when the portraitist Richard Halstead offered us this appraisal of his much-admired colleague, the pastel artist Ellen Eagle (b. 1953). A lifelong New Yorker, Eagle earned her B.F.A. from the California College of the Arts and studied in New York with Harvey Dinnerstein and at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Art Students League (where she has taught since 2005). Represented by Forum Gallery, she is an active member of the Pastel Society of America and will participate in a 2017 group show opening at Texas A&M University. In 2013, Watson-Guptill published Eagle's book *Pastel Painting Atelier: Essential Lessons in Techniques, Practices, and Materials*. Just this year, it published the volume *Art Students League of New York on Painting: Lessons and Meditations on Mediums, Styles, and Methods*, to which Eagle contributed a chapter on her own work.



*Self-Portrait, 2011, pastel on pumice board, 8 x 5 3/8 in., Collection Dr. Robert Ritch*

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When I look at the art of Ellen Eagle, I am reminded of my earliest interest in portraits. I was a boy, looking at reproductions of Old Master paintings in my parents' attic, moved by something about them that was immediately present, yet otherworldly at the same time. Eagle's paintings are like that. They are very specific and faithful to the individual sitter's character and momentary presence, but also larger — timeless and universal in their evocation of the human psyche.

In *The Art Spirit*, the influential book he published in 1923, the artist and teacher Robert Henri (1865–1929) wrote:

*There are moments in our lives, there are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual — become clairvoyant. We reach then into reality. Such are the moments of our greatest*

*happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. It is in the nature of all people to have these experiences; but in our time and under the conditions of our lives, it is only a rare few who are able to continue in the experience and find expression for it.*

Eagle's portraits look very different from Henri's, but, ironically, they are the quintessence of his statement. They are so utterly real, so painfully everyday, but they are also bathed in an ambient light that suggests her subjects somehow are blessed by an unseen presence. I am drawn back to them whenever I grow tired of the affectations of most portraitists today. At first, I am restored by the honesty of her portrayals. Then, as I study them more closely, I feel little firings going off in my brain, ones I can only describe as the experience of being repeatedly stunned by what she has accomplished within such quiet, unassuming presentations. Each small section of the image offers a new surprise, with its own impact, yet all are perfectly integrated so that the viewer can comfortably explore the face or figure without feeling disconnected from the whole. Who would guess there could be such subtly interwoven passages in the depiction of a single figure?

The people in Eagle's works, as well as her technique, are unashamedly earthy, but still painted with the sensitivity and intricacy

of a Chopin sonata. This intrinsic contrast is the basis of her power: a contrast between that which is weighty and elemental and that which is sensitive and refined; between deeply felt emotion, even passion, and the restraint of discipline and thoughtfulness; between the simplicity of a single figure and the complex arrangement of subtle movements within the figure, and within the light and space surrounding it. These contrasts fittingly engender both a sense of serenity and of being very much alive.

If you have not felt this way while regarding one of Eagle's portraits, I suggest visiting it again when your mind is quieter. They require patience and receptivity. Eagle's vision will not



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*Portrait of the Young Artist Marela Alvarez, 2014, pastel on pumice board, 11 1/4 x 9 1/4 in., Forum Gallery, New York City*

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leap out at you, and is too dignified to demand your attention. These pictures are not advertisements for the artist, but rather intimate conversations with close friends. If you take the time to study Eagle's portraits, you discover you're in a privileged space, talking about the deepest experiences of your life, or hers, or the sitters'.

If you are put off by the homeliness of everyday life, you may not like Eagle's paintings. If not, they will lead you to an even greater belief in the survival of the human spirit. At various points, many of us have questioned our ability to survive with our authentic vision intact. Eagle's paintings suggest that she

too has struggled, possibly doubting herself now and then, but also that she has tenaciously returned to that steady gaze at life, as it is — in all its quiet glory. Her works give the impression that they were made by someone with heart, stubbornness, and conviction.

The Canadian author Margaret Laurence said she wrote about what everyone knew but had never thought to write about. Similarly, Ellen Eagle paints what we all see and typically disregard as insignificant. Tactfully and unobtrusively, she slips past the shields her sitters wear to protect themselves, and then she paints them in the safety of her world. By allowing

us to see them this way, in their least guarded moments, she confirms for us that what is genuine is, ultimately, what is most beautiful.

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**Richard Halstead** is a portrait artist and founder/director of the Halstead School of Portrait and Figure Art. His paintings are in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, the Illinois and Indiana State Houses, Purdue University, Yale University, Rush Presbyterian St. Luke Medical Center (Chicago), University of Melbourne, Loyola University School of Law (Chicago), Episcopal Diocese of New York, and in many private collections. He lives and works in Evanston, Illinois.