

Saugy Imparts a Visionary Dimension to Modern Portraiture

Think of commissioned portraits, especially of the corporate or institutional variety, and what invariably comes to mind are dull, fawningly flattering likenesses of middle aged executives, clergy, or college presidents, posed stiffly in offices or libraries, cranked out in lackluster oils by academic hacks.

By contrast, the Swiss-French painter Catherine de Saugy, known as "Saugy," primarily for her multi-dimensional, luminously translucent abstractions on Plexiglas, takes a characteristically innovative approach to the very few portrait commissions she accepts each year.



"Like music, portraits are a dialogue," the artist says. "I explore and capture the essence of my subject's aspirations, interests, and passions."

Toward this end, starting with her own photographic imagery, as Andy Warhol did (albeit in a more garishly mundane manner)

in his famous portraits, Saugy presents her subjects in semiabstract metaphysical settings, rather than posing them in static interiors. In some of her portraits, such as "Herve Dessimoz, Architecte," more than one image of

the sitter is employed to convey different aspects of the subject's personality.

In the case of Dessimoz, a close-up of the distinguished architect with his rimless spectacles and distinctive salt and pepper moustache, smiling broadly in a white, open-collared shirt and dark jacket, dominates the foreground of the picture. A welcome relief from the usual distant, dour, self-important, often intimidating poses in most such portraits, the viewer gets a sense of meeting this amiable gentleman in casual circumstances for a private consultation.

This image is juxtaposed with a slightly smaller likeness of the same man, now with a thoughtful, businesslike expression standing behind a scale model of a dome-like structure of his own design, surrounded by other examples of his architectural projects that Saugy has combined in a composition with a pleasing sense of formal balances akin to those of her abstract paintings. Thus the artist creates a visionary context for the portrait that enables the viewer to feel that he or she is



entering directly into Dessimoz's creative imagination.

In "Patrick Aebischer, President of EPFL, Switzerland, Power Through Biotechnology," however, perhaps in keeping with a more corporate identity, Saugy reverses the emphasis of the imagery somewhat, presenting the youthful, dark-haired executive in formal business attire in the close-up portrait dominating the foreground of the composition. Here, too, to

evoke the mysterious realm of biotechnology the images are multiplied and presented within a Perspex Block for added depth.

Beyond the foreground portrait is a more ethereal image of Aebischer, its continuity slightly interrupted by overlapping rectangular shapes, holding up a small globe-like sphere in one hand. Although the gesture is casual, it somehow suggests the mannered elegance of a meta-physician demonstrating an arcane principle in a Renaissance painting. Yet another rectangular

area of the mostly monochromatic composition contains a bright profusion of brilliant red, blue, and green linear abstract forms, evoking a sense of natural energies harnessed by science. And in the right side of the work is a yet image of Aebischer, now seated with open collar at his desk, his casual elegance akin to that of the handsome contemporary French philosopher and activist Bernard-Henri Levy.

Such subtle associations imbue Saugy's contemporary depictions of people accomplished in various fields with a complexity of character and personality precious rare in the portraiture of this or any other age.

— Marie R. Pagano