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Elliot shares oil pastel skills during Hopper House retrospective

Emily Kratzer
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Sweeping landscapes, the sweep of his daughter's hair, the curly locks of a caftan-wearing artist - John Elliot has done them all in oil pastels.

A retrospective of his work at the Edward Hopper House Art Center shows not only his early works as a pioneer in the use of oil pastels, but also selected graphite self-portraits and a feminist-statement in acrylic.

Formerly a professional filmmaker, the 83-year-old has devoted himself to his artwork since he and his wife, writer Sheila Hollihan-Elliot, retired to Upper Nyack. She curated the exhibit.

"I first drew when I was 2," he said last week while Hopper House trustee Mort Stoltze and college intern Christine Etienne finished hanging the works.

The son of U.S. diplomats grew up to study in Italy. While there, he was invited to work in design in the film industry. Later, he formed his own film-production company. During his career, he did advertising work on the Muriel Cigar account, which featured the actress Edie Adams.

He quit working on cigar and cigarette promotions after a friend showed him lungs destroyed by smoking.

"I was the first one to do that. I didn't want to be part of this criminal activity," Elliot said. Instead, he was assigned toy or food accounts.

Health concerns have figured in his use of water-soluble oils and oil pastels, said Hollihan-Elliot.

"Oil pastels have no fumes," she said. "It helps if one paints in the studio or the kitchen. Other family members don't have to breathe the fumes."

Oil pastels were developed in the 1920s and got a boost from Pablo Picasso and Henri Goetz in the late 1940s. Elliot has championed oil pastels, working as a consultant with oil pastel manufacturers to improve the product.

He drew all during his filmmaking career, which took him overseas.

"I always painted no matter what. When I traveled for filmmaking, it was convenient to sit anywhere and work," he said. Plus, the ornery nature of the artist comes out when he says, "I believe in working in all media, but I concentrate on oil pastel because it's discriminated against as a new media. You have a hard time getting respected. You can produce works that look like traditional oil or pastels - but all from one box."

Elliot's sense of humor emerges when he talks about drawing himself: "At least the fellow sitting for the portrait can't sue the artist if he doesn't like the image!"

He loves doing portraits and finds portraiture "rewarding because you surprise the sitter because

you discover something (in them) they didn't know."

One enthusiastic subject was his son Gilbert, who put on a cowboy hat one day and demanded, "Paint me!" That work, "Cowboy Gilbert" is displayed in the back parlor, with portraits of Elliot's daughters, Hope and Faith, and Hope's son Drew. That one, "At Age 2," is done in water-soluble pastel and washes on pastel board. Near them is "Woman in Red," one of his portraits of his wife. It was drawn on a heated metallic plate, to demonstrate another way to use oil pastels.

The front room is full of landscapes. "Old Timers, Tugboats at Petersons, Upper Nyack NY," includes gouache; and another is an impasto done with water-soluble oil using a palette knife. The large work "Chapel in the Woods, West Cornwall, Ct." was done to show what could be done with oil pastels and includes portions on which he used solvent or washes.

These days he gives private lessons, and visitors to the exhibit can benefit from his knowledge. He will be at the Hopper House each Saturday and Sunday during the exhibit, and will give gallery talks and guide budding portraitists at a Sept. 6 workshop.

He shares this wisdom: impose total control on the subject because he's had occasions when friends and families gave too much advice on the work in progress.

His current projects are a series of landscapes from his sketchbook of the Hudson River, which he calls "the birthplace of some of the best American art."
