

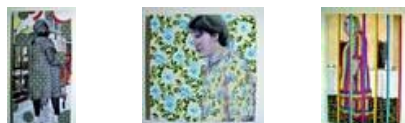
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Unraveling personas: Festa's paintings explore intersection of clothing and identity

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courtesy
Festa sometimes takes candid photos of people that she turns into paintings. This painting called 'Target,' done with oil paints on fabric, comes from a photo of woman shopping.



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By **Daniel DeMaina / ddemain@cnc.com**

[GateHouse News Service](#)

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Melrose — Clothes may make the woman — but make her what?

Danielle Festa has an interest in clothing and fabric, both as canvas for her art and as a canvas where people project identities, conceptions and stereotypes. It's why she's working on a new series called "Paper Dolls" that debuts Friday, Sept. 5 at The Beebe Estate Gallery in Melrose, where the 23-year-old will be the youngest artist so far to have an exhibition at the gallery.

Festa said she's always been attracted to the realism displayed in Italian Renaissance paintings, citing a 2006 summer program at the Scuola Lorenzo De' Medici in Florence, Italy that made her even more drawn to the tactile oil paintings of that age. Conceptually, however, Festa said she looks to artists like famous photographer Cindy Sherman.

"[Sherman] uses herself, mostly, and dresses up like different people and kind of shows the importance of dress," she said. "That is kind of what I do. I've been talking about people's clothing and how that makes them appear a certain way."

The interest in clothing is evident in Festa's "Unraveled" series, featuring what she calls "conceptual realist" oil portraits of people where their clothing literally comes off the canvas. In one painting titled "Business Woman," a well dressed, young professional woman stares blankly at the viewer, wearing a blue blouse and skirt, while a shredded piece of fabric is attached to the painting and hangs down and off the canvas, belying the stoic and unflappable person above.

Festa said her interest in fabric has evolved, an ongoing conversation in her mind about clothing, starting with the "Unraveled" series and then painting directly on fabric, instead of canvas, and leaving sections of it unpainted.

"Not that it's gotten better or worse, but [it's] just changing the way I've been talking about the same thing," she said. "I was using fabrics very literally in those ones [painting on

fabric]. In this latest series, I actually went back to just the paint and the canvas, but painting about the clothing. The question was, 'can I make the same point without using the fabric?' They're just two different approaches to it, but it's the same concept."

Now taking a page from her Cindy Sherman influence, Festa plans on using herself in the "Paper Dolls" series. To research the concept, she ordered paper dolls online to see the clothing that comes with each doll.

"I looked at them and they're kind of just stereotyping people in the titles, like 'African Girl,'" she said, laughing. "It comes with a traditional African dress. That's all she could be. That's all she is. I used myself [in the "Paper Dolls" series] as a blank canvas to take on these personas, these stereotypes of people or women.

"I haven't touched cross-dressing yet," she added, laughing again.

Starting with a concept

Festa, daughter of former state representative and current state Secretary of Elder Affairs Mike Festa, had her interest in art started at a young age. As young as three years old, she would draw with crayons and paint with watercolors. At the age of nine, she received her first set of real acrylic paint.

"Not that I knew what to do with them," she chuckled, "but I was very excited by that."

In high school, Festa started taking her artwork more seriously, realizing her passion. After arriving at UMass Amherst, she had a decision to face.

"I wasn't sure at first if it [art] was the life I wanted to go for, but I realized I really couldn't ignore the passion I had for it," she said.

At UMass, where she earned both a bachelor and masters degree in the fine arts, Festa learned from both her professors and other students the idea of conceptual art — not simply sitting down in front of a blank canvas, but exploring an idea before picking up the paintbrush. Her professors encouraged her to first ask: "Why are you painting?"

"A lot of course work was very loosely assigned, but you had to type out a proposal before you could paint," she said. "Going through the process, that might change, but you start with an idea and at the end we'd end up doing the same thing, only revised. In talking [with others], your idea turns into something much more than it probably started out as, instead of just staring at a blank piece of paper. That's what some people do, but I really found that I benefited from starting from a concept and letting it unfold."

The idea of working with a concept or an idea that evolves over the course of examination also led Festa to discover her desire to work in series. Rather than creating one painting on a subject, she uses a series of paintings that allow both her and her audience to discover new angles on the same concept, each painting building on the last.

"Once you have that template, you can explore something, I find, so much more by doing multiples," she said. "They lend to each other, they help each other out by making a point together."

Getting noticed

Like many young artists, Festa uses a day job to pay the bills, but fortunately she's found a job that intersects with her creativity and art. As a graphic designer, she's created everything from advertisements and restaurant menus to characters and icons for the Web. She even made a book for The Shriners that features Spiderman leading a child through a visit to a Shriners' Hospital.

"It's a life-work balance. I would love to just dedicate all my time to painting — it was great in college," she said with a chuckle. "I appreciated it, but I didn't know how great it is to paint every day and not worry about money. Now I'm hit with the students loans and I realize it a little more."

Another benefit to graphic design is that programs such as Photoshop make it much easier and quicker to develop images for her clients, Festa said. Using Photoshop is something she's used to, since she often uses photos she takes as the basis for her paintings.

Some of the photos Festa takes are candid and the subjects unwittingly wind up at the end of her paintbrush.

"A lot of the people I found actually didn't even know that I painted them," she said. "They're more real to me because when I had people sit for me, they knew they were sitting for me. This kind of snapshot of someone's, life where they are being judged, was the upside for me.

"Also you lose some of the quality. It's hard to get that perfect shot when you're trying to be sly and not be noticed," she added with a laugh.

With her upcoming exhibition at the Beebe Estate Gallery, Festa's likely to get noticed. She first applied to show her work there last year, right after getting out of college, and faced the long wait many artists do

when trying to get a show at the Beebe.


Festa said the wait only meant she had a chance to develop enough pieces to fill the whole gallery by herself, pieces that she thinks are more contemporary than the work usually shown at the Beebe Gallery. Although she looks forward to introducing new, unexpected work to the gallery, she doesn't think it will take any patrons aback.

"My shock value is not that high," she said, laughing. "But I don't think people are used to seeing fabric coming off a canvas. I'm excited to see people's reactions."

If you go ...

Danielle Festa's artwork will be on display at the Beebe Estate Gallery, 235 West Foster St., Melrose, throughout the month of September, beginning with an opening reception on Friday, Sept. 5 from 7-9 p.m. The gallery is open to the public every Saturday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. To get a sneak preview, visit Festa's Web site at daniellefesta.com.

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