Through the Generations

ASP Fellowship Thesis

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Master of Photography
Photographic Craftsman

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Introduction

As a little boy of 4, with no mother and a father in name only to speak of, I found myself in the study of my grandparents' grand home, staring up at someone I'd never met. But it was someone I knew nonetheless. He was dressed impressively and posed regally for a painting that seemed beyond life size to me at the time. I felt so close to him it was as if I could touch him. Though I didn't know it at the time, this was the moment. The moment I fell in love with art and the moment I realized its impact upon the hearts of generations.

For thirty years now, I have been creating fine portraiture for clients near and far. For me, creating these portraits is an honor. They are something I know from experience will stand the test of time and become cherished family heirlooms in the years to come. Creating these portraits is a process that I have been studying and perfecting for many years. Beginning with a child's love of art to a college student's leap of faith, my journey to having my own portrait studio and being a successful photographer is one that impacts me on a daily basis.

Photography and portraiture as a business is the same as all businesses; it has its own set of difficulties and achieving success is often an arduous process. It takes years of disciplined work, but striving for the goal is part of the joy of reaching it. I've found the three biggest keys for my own success are to stay motivated, seek knowledge, and remain vigilant. What seems to be common in those who are successful, the ones who thrive, is their passion and hard work. My desire to create art and capture the features and feelings of my subject drives me to do my very best and to devote myself to pushing the boundaries of my craft.

Each of us, as photographers, is attempting to create a unique body of work based on his or her individual artistic path. But we all speak the same visual "language." Each of us has learned the fundamentals of photography that we use to express our individual visions. My own artistic vision was inspired by events of my childhood coupled with knowledge from other experienced photographers and portrait artists. On my path to

becoming a portrait artist, I've attempted to blend these experiences to capture the spark within each individual subject and the essence of each person.

There is no magic formula for how many miles of photographic paper to print, how many books to read, or how many images to study before becoming successful. Each of us has our own journey on a path we forge and follow to become our own artist.

The Beginning

As a young child, my parents divorced and my brother and I lived with my father. My father worked long hours and we were tended to mostly by maids. My brother and I contracted tuberculosis from one of the maids, whose own condition went undetected. Due to my illness, I was in complete isolation from age 3 to 4 and upon the recovery of both me and my brother, we moved in with my grandparents.

My love of art began growing up in the home of my paternal grandparents. Both of my grandparents came from families where life size oil portraits were commissioned and handed down through the generations. Being a rather lonely child, and receiving very little attention from my father or grandparents, these portraits were my family. I'd gaze up at them and imagine who these people were and figure out how they fit into our family's history. Each brush stroke helped tell the story of my ancestors and I'd marvel at how a painter was able to give them such a life-like appearance. As part of this grand tradition, I still have some of these original portraits hanging in my own home. And as I pass them, I remember the comfort they brought me as a child, until I created a new family all my own.

This feeling of being connected to the previous generation is never lost on me as I photograph individuals today. I hope that because of what I do families in the future will know their ancestry. The greater purpose of portraiture for me is to keep memories alive, to preserve an innocent time, to capture the joy, the growth, the change, and even

sometimes the pains of life in the present. And hopefully what is captured will be preserved so that future generations can learn, remember and appreciate what passed before them.

Defining Moments

Already intrigued by the mammoth art in our home, my grandmother was a painter of landscapes and had a studio in the house, which added to my interest in art. I spent hours in her studio watching her draw, mix colors, and paint. I learned much from her about composition and perspective as she spent endless hours with me, patiently trying to teach me to draw.

It is strange the things you remember from childhood. I remember one particular day quite well; I sneaked into my grandmother's studio where she kept, along one wall, a work table lined with tin coffee cans and Ball jars filled with paintbrushes of all shapes and sizes. I remember taking some of these brushes and tickling the palm of my hand with their soft bristles. Tubes of oil paints covered the table, some empty, some half full, some mashed and dented, others rolled up carefully from the end of the tubes forward. For me, this was a defining moment in my youth in which I realized a love of art and a desire for my life to be filled with creativity.

Although my grandmother spent many hours trying to help me express my creativity in her studio, I began to grow frustrated by not being able to paint people or capture their emotions in a way that I desired. The way I had seen them captured in those extraordinary oil paintings in my grandparents home.

When I reached high school and began dating my wife, Dianne, her father introduced me to photography and my whole world changed. He was a retired Army veteran and had used photography to document the black market in Vietnam during his time with the CIA. When I saw what could be revealed through the lens, the camera became my

medium of expression and I suddenly realized that I could capture the details of expressions and emotions that had eluded my paintbrush.

After entering college in 1971, a near miss with Uncle Sam and the Vietnam War left me without enrollment for the following semester. Avoiding the horror of Vietnam was a relief to say the least and what I am even more thankful for is how it served as a catalyst for my career as a photographer. After spending a couple of summers working in a portrait studio, I knew this was my opportunity to take the leap and begin working as a professional photographer.

My first studio was simply a desk in the back corner of a frame shop; all of my portraits were shot outdoors. Fortunately, outdoor photography was all the rage, so I started my business without a hefty investment in lighting equipment, canvas backgrounds, and props that a full studio would require. I joined the Professional Photographers of America and my state association so I could learn all I could.

Inspiration

During my early years, I came across a book that I would read many times over. I knew of Paul Linwood Gittings and was aware that he had brought the field of portraiture to prominence in the United States. He photographed high-powered families and individuals in the style of classic portraiture, which resonated with me, harkening back to those oil paintings I'd grown up with. His book, *Color Portraiture*, showed me that truly fine portraiture could be produced with a camera. The book covered a range of topics from his back-story to marketing to composition. It was this book that showed me I could achieve success doing what I was passionate about as an artist, regardless of whether or not it was trendy at the time. I was, and still am, greatly influenced by his work.

For many years I created photographic portraits I hoped would reach a level of artistry equal to Gittings. Then in the mid 1990s, I met and studied with Philip Stewart Charis, a

former student and friend of Gittings and a close friend of mine to this day. Charis taught me how to produce the classical, life-sized, studio portraits and he moved me another giant step forward in my life's journey. As the most influential photographer in my life, it was Charis who exposed me to the theory that Rembrandt discovered hundreds of years ago. Before Rembrandt, all portraits were painted at 100% scale. Because the person was the exact same size as the painting, the painting was overwhelming to the viewer. It was Rembrandt who discovered that a portrait painted at 80% of full scale still appeared to be life-sized, but was more pleasing to the viewer's eye. Since that time, all fine portraits have been painted to this scale.

I successfully introduced this scale into my portraiture. This was, however, only one piece of the puzzle on the road to becoming an artist. I was aware that technical rules of photography existed and had to be learned; I knew that these rules were separate from individual artistic styles. I also knew that creating life-size photographs did not fulfill my artistic desires. I wanted to create portraits through photography that were as impactful as the life-size painted portraits of my youth.

It was then that I discovered the software Painter. Painter allowed my computer to become a tool I could use to make my dream of producing painted portraiture for my clients a reality.

For more than 10 years now, I have been producing painted portraits using sophisticated inkjet printers, and I continue to push the boundaries of my art. Eventually, I'd like to produce paintings on canvas using oil paint rather than the pigment inks used today. I have worked with people in other industries that are producing billboards this way. Although their images are good enough for viewing from a great distance, the quality is far inferior to the results I get from pigment inks. I look forward to one day creating quality oil paintings from an image painted in a computer that will rival those of "free hand" painters. It is fascinating for me to be able to keep the grand tradition of fine portraiture while combining principals set forward by Rembrandt and using technology that continues to evolve each year.

Portfolio

The majority of my portraiture features individuals, just like those portraits hanging on the wall at my grandparents' house all those years ago. To me, the face is everything in fine portraiture, it's always my starting point and what I feel gives the portrait its heart, its story, its life.

The portrait in the center of my portfolio is almost entirely a face and nothing more. I think it really symbolizes where my focus is as a photographer and what I value most in my portraits. That same portrait also happens to be of my daughter. My wife and children are central to who I am. Coming from a rather cold and fractured family, they taught me how to love and be loved and they are always at the heart of everything I do.

One of the portraits I relate to the most is three to the right of the center portrait. There are three children, all siblings in various positions on a sofa. These children were adopted by their aunt, after their parents lost custody. Their aunt has been a long time client of mine and having several portraits of her biological children, she wanted her nieces and nephew to feel they were just as much a part of the family as her own biological children. The little girl who is standing, is slowly going deaf, due to her mother's drug use while she was in utero. I can't help think how lucky these children are to have found such a wonderful, loving family and a safe, happy home with their aunt, uncle and cousins. And while I can't compare my own family's shortcomings with theirs, I understand what it's like to have parents who don't meet your expectations and every time I look at this portrait, I'm overwhelmed with joy, knowing the life they will have is immeasurably better than the life they left behind.

I think that all of these portraits, collectively, show the inherent value of life through the generations. There are children, parents, and seniors each representing different life stages and communicating joy, wisdom, love and contentment. They are the kinds of images that will mark the stages of these people's lives. They will be the memories that

hang in dining rooms and living rooms and studies. They will be images by which those who come after them, mark their ancestry, just as I did when I was a child.

Development

Given that I don't want to just repeat the work of past centuries, I think one of the great challenges I face is discovering what I am going to create. To merely record the surface appearance of the subject has never been my desire. From the beginning, artists have recorded the things that had meaning to them and their works are a living record of their consciousness on earth. To continue the testimony of what humans have seen, believed, felt, and thought is one of my main goals as a portrait artist. To seek beauty and meaning in our lives is to breathe life into art.

When budding photographers ask for my advice, I always tell them that it is a different journey for everyone, but high on the list of priorities is the need to thoroughly study the craft and understand the technical aspects of photography and painting. Over the years I have not only studied with many great photographers to improve my skills but have studied the portrait painters of yesterday and today. Thankfully there were dedicated teachers and photographers who carried the torch of classical photography and passed it on. At this stage in my life it's hard to remember exactly who taught me what, but I like to think I learn something from all the colleagues and teachers I meet. I think each of us has a responsibility to pass what we have learned onto those we encounter.

If you are recording an image of someone, you can just record facts. If you are creating a portrait, you must have a premise. The premise of a portrait is what guides me as I pose the subject(s) and continue to make decisions throughout the session. When creating someone's portrait, I try and discover what that person represents and what I feel is necessary to express about life through him or her. I want to learn all I can about the subject before I begin, so that their family and those who come after them will have a portrait that is the full expression of their loved one.

It has taken me my entire life to create portraits as I do. Most of the portraits hanging in museums represent years of tireless work on the part of the artist who painted them – beginning with a solid foundation in training and followed by a lifetime of experimentation and experience. I think most photographers would agree that their paths are similar in that they begin with a fundamental understanding of their craft and layer on experience after experience to develop their own brand of artistry. It is in those layers and experiences where the details live, the details that have led me to become the artist I am today.

I have discovered that the wise choice in life is to dream my dream without fear of failure and more importantly, without fear of success. Wisdom comes not from collecting information, but from integrating that information with what you do, who you are, and what you create.

It was not my desire to manipulate photography to fit my personal vision, but to use it to express what I see in the world and what I see in the faces of my clients.   To record for generations to come, their heritage, their ancestry, their family. For me, photography is one of the greatest and most challenging occupations of all: creating art that has emotional meaning, technical excellence and that, in its truthfulness and beauty, conveys worth to its owners. Each day is a challenge to which I fully devote myself.

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BIOGRAPHY:

William Henry Branson III was born on August 3, 1953. Raised in Durham, NC, William chose to stay in his hometown and open a photographic portrait studio in the fall of 1972. The first studio was a desk in the back of a frame gallery. Three years later, in 1975, he built the studio that he is still in today. For the next 25 years, he honed his skills creating studio and location portraiture and photographing weddings.

In the early 1990s, William chose to take his business in a new direction by only offering formal, studio portraiture, dropping location sessions and weddings so that he could spend more time with his family. It was in the mid 1990s that he met and studied with Philip Stewart Charis. A year later he discovered the software Painter and from there, developed the painted portraiture that he produces today.

William has dedicated his life to his family, hard work, experimentation within his craft and the pursuit of excellence. Clients travel from as far away as Holland, Germany, South Africa, Japan and South America as well as from all over the United States to sit for their portrait.

His images have garnered him some of the highest honors the portrait profession has to offer. William is an active member of Cameracraftsmen of America, the Professional Photographers of America, The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and a founding member of the International Society of Portrait Artist. Active in his community, Branson has served on the planning board to create a new bank, was a member of Tobaccoland Kiwanis and is currently a board member of an art center that benefits children and families.

William has been happily married to his wife Dianne for 36 years. They have two children: Anna, 34 and William, 30, and a daughter-in-law, Lauren.

1971 Graduate, Charles E. Jordan High School

1971-1972 Louisburg College

1982 Winona Professional Photography School

1976, 1977, 1981, 1983 North Carolina Professional Photography School

1998-2011 East Coast School

AWARDS:

2008 Master of Photography Degree, PPA

2009 Craftsman Degree, PPA

2000-2010 12 Loan Merits, PPA

1998-2010 60 Total Exhibition Merits, PPA

2011 Diamond - Photographer of the Year, PPA

2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 Silver - Photographer of the Year, PPA

2004 Bronze – Photographer of the Year, PPA

1999, 2005 AN-NE Winner, PPA

2000, 2004 AN-NE Runner Up Awards, PPA

2001, 2003, 2009, 2010 – 2 Distinguished Awards, SEPPA

2002, 2005 – 1 Distinguished Award, SEPPA

2006, 2007 – 1st Place Award, SEPPA

2009 – Best in Show, SEPPA

2000, 2003, 2010, 2011 Photographer of the Year, PPNC

2009, 2010, 2011 Best of Show, PPNC

2000, 2009, 2010, 2011 Kodak Gallery Award, PPNC

2010, 2011 ASP State Award, PPNC

2000, 2008 Fuji Masterpiece Award, PPNC

2003, 2005, 2006 AMMA Award Winner, PPNC

1999 International Slide Exhibition, 4 of 4 submissions accepted, The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain

2007 *Royal Photographic Society Portfolio One*, 2 of 2 submissions accepted, The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain

2010 *Royal Photographic Society Portfolio Two*, 1 of 2 submissions accepted, The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain

2000 Outstanding Artist and Designers of the 20th Century Award, International
Biographical Centre- Cambridge, England

2000 Epcot Exhibit, Walt Disney World- Orlando, FL

AFFILIATIONS:

Member, American Society of Photographers

Member, Professional Photographer of America

Member, Southeastern Professional Photographers of America

Member, Professional Photographers of North Carolina

Member, Cameracraftsmen of America

Member, The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain

Founding Member, The International Society of Portrait Artists

Member, Epworth Methodist Church