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An Interview with Jennifer Lockard Connerley: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Academic

by Tara Robbins Fee

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Abstract: Tara Robbins Fee interviews the artist Jennifer Lockard Connerley. They explore Connerley's shift from academic to professional artist, touching on notions of professionalism, credentialing, faith, and the visual world.

Keywords: painting, portraiture, interview, academic, literature, artists, Jennifer Lockard Connerley

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Introduction

In 2010, Jennifer Lockard Connerley left a career as a tenure-track professor of American religious history at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in order to become a professional artist. She is now a portrait painter living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In this interview, she discusses how she made the decision to exit the academic profession, what she tries to capture when painting a portrait, and what portraiture might offer that photography can't. We also touch on the shared sensibility in her portraits of bonneted Mennonite nudes, chickens wearing socks, and the newborn infants of Russian strangers.

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Tara Robbins Fee: First, I should start by sharing that we know each other personally—we go way back to the days when we shared a tiny purple office in Greenlaw Hall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where we were both graduate students.

Jennifer Lockard Connerley: Yes!

TRF: And after our days in graduate school, you moved on to James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. How long did you teach there? Was it five years?

JLC: I taught full time from 2006–2010. I was just staring down tenure. My intermediate review in my third year had gone really well, and I had no concerns or anxieties about the tenure process. But it felt like a tipping point toward building a career as an academic forever, and then in 2010, I went off to learn to paint.

TRF: How did that decision come about? Was that something you had wanted to do for a long time? I ask because you had worked as a glassblower before graduate school, so you had had an artistic trade before.

JLC: I had. I think—to be honest—the process of my transitioning to become an artist actually started in the McDonald's off the 15–501 highway during my last year of grad school, in that conversation I had with you and with Katie (Kathryn Lofton, now a professor of religious studies at Yale University). At that point, I was not staring down tenure, but I was staring down completing my dissertation. I remember talking very seriously with both of you about whether I should leave graduate school and pursue art.

You both wisely advised me to finish because I was so close to being done, and we all knew how costly it was to get to that point. But I would say that that conversation stayed with me

forever. You were both so generous, and so thoughtful in helping me think through the practicalities but also very loving about my desire to do this thing.

And the funny thing about art, or the thing that I have found to be funny about it in my life is that because it engages so much your physical self, it makes a difference what kind of art you're doing. So glassblowing, I knew, was not ever going to be a lifelong choice for me. I didn't have the interest in braving the heat, and glassblowing at that time—it's less so now—but at the time I was blowing glass it was a very macho pursuit. That's a long way of saying that the tipping point was probably that conversation that we had, years before I ever decided to attend art school.

TRF: Why didn't we have the foresight to have that conversation at the Old Well or somewhere significant instead of a random McDonald's? Why were we even *at* that McDonald's? You were a vegetarian!

JLC: No idea, and I think that was the last time I set foot in a McDonald's. I'm sure I miss it!

TRF: The last time I was in a McDonald's was yesterday.

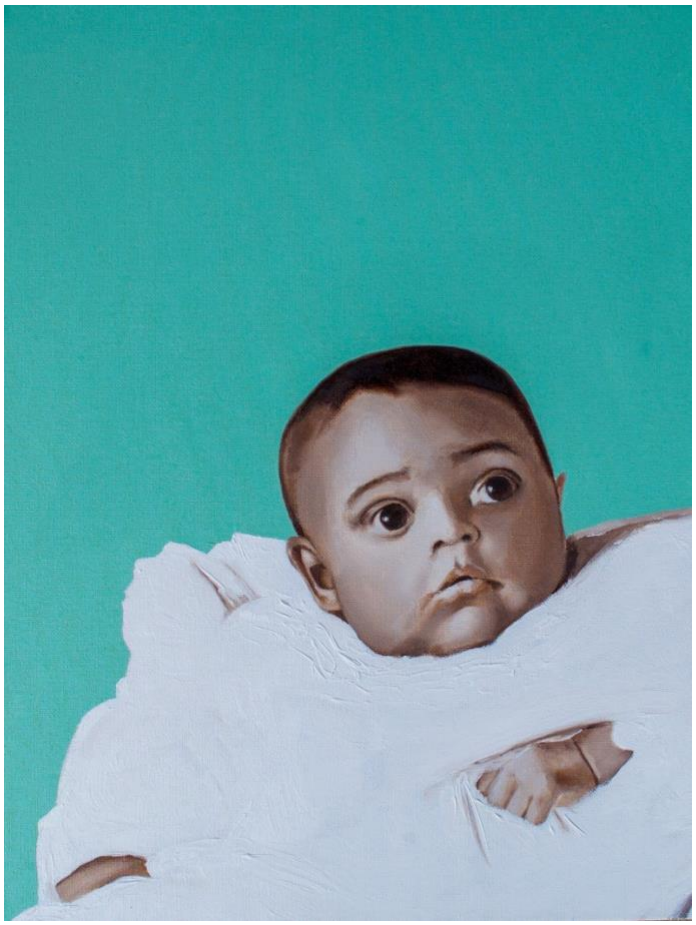
JLC: That's very joyful. I have to go back.

TRF: To your artistic birthplace.

JLC: For fries and an apple pie.

TRF: Did you already know that you wanted to paint then, or was it a more general instinct that you wanted to do something artistic or creative?

JLC: When I was very young, I painted and drew. And when I was working with glass, where I went to college was the nexus of glassblowing in the Midwest. I went to Centre College, as you know, and Steven Rolfe Powell was the center of the ceramics and glass program there, and he sort of shaped my trajectory into doing ceramics and then doing glass. But when I was young, I always painted and drew, and that's where I always wanted to be.



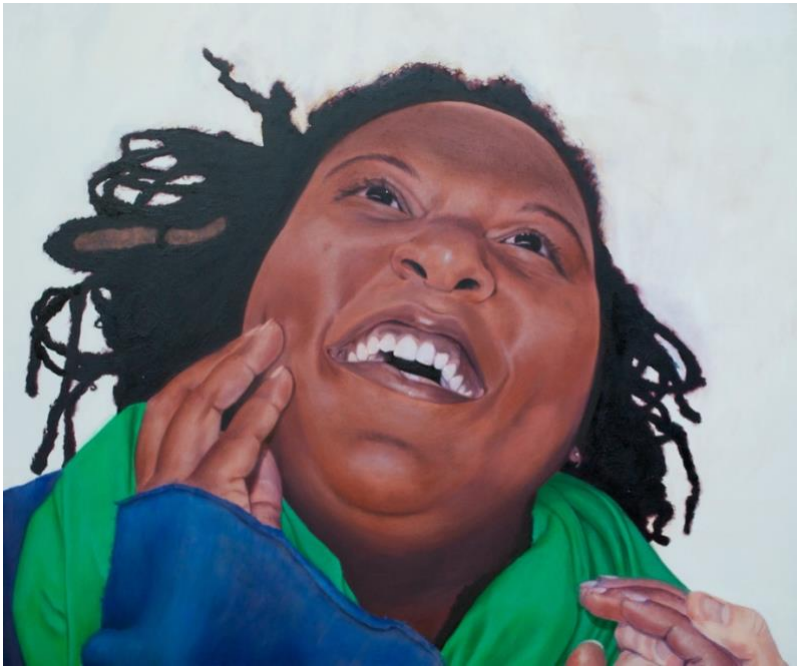
Untitled (oil on canvas)

I enjoyed making objects—that was meaningful to me because I loved making things that had some utility and some form in the world. I've thought about this a lot today in anticipation of our conversation because I grew up an evangelical, but even more than growing up evangelical, I grew up working class. And in the universe that I occupied with my parents, the things that you had to do in life were useful and were things that would pay the bills. So it was always really hard for me to imagine the utility of painting and drawing, and or to know how you could make money painting and drawing. Those were the only two important things in that worldview.

So making a cup or making a vase or making a candelabra or making an ornament for a Christmas tree—those were things that were useful and material, and you could sell them to someone for money. It's not surprising that that's where I started. It's not surprising that that was my first job after college. And it wasn't until I was much, much older that I started to understand that art on the wall has utility and you can make money from it—but also that aside from those two things, there are other values that are significant and resonant.

TRF: When you decided, was there a transition period where you were painting and teaching at JMU? Did you go to painting school straight from your tenure-track job?

JLC: Yes. What I should have done, but was not educated enough about the art world to know, was to ask for a leave of absence and then entered an atelier to learn to paint better. What I did instead was to remain very attached to the idea that I needed yet another degree, and I needed a degree from a very good school. And so, because I was fixated on the idea that I couldn't achieve something artistic for myself, I had to do it through the pathways of academics. I applied to only painting schools in the top 20 in the US, and I didn't get into any of them. And I did it again the next year, and I got into the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and I went and I loved it, and I learned to paint. It was there that I learned to be a professional artist.



Mission Hill/Chapel Hill

When it came to the second year of the MFA, (my husband) David and I looked at each other and realized that I could continue, but that I would need to take out massive loans, which we had not done for my education up to that point. We talked about it for a long time and realized that my continuing and finishing the degree would allow me to teach art, but I didn't really want to do that, and it would allow me to work in a museum, but I didn't really want to do that either. And it would have allowed me to have a master's thesis, which would have been meaningful to me, but it wasn't necessary to get where I wanted to go,

which was to be a painter and to paint things. So we decided that I would not finish the MFA.

That was a really difficult decision because it meant letting go of that attachment that I had to the degree and to the stamp of approval that would come from the school. So I came home—at that time, home was Virginia—and started painting and continued to teach as an adjunct because I still could not let go of my identity of being an academic.

TRF: At that point, you were painting your Amish and Mennonite nudes?

JLC: Yes, I was interested in painting in a way that was really inexpensive because I was caught up in this idea that this was something that shouldn't cost a lot. So I would go to Lowe's, and I would have really cheap plywood panels cut and then do a wash over them and paint onto them. Those paintings were kind of a way of working through my feelings about my own religious faith, my feelings about living in the Valley, my feelings about painting and what it was supposed to do, and my feelings about portraiture because of course you don't see faces in those pictures. So I think those pictures were a way of working through a lot of the hangups that I had that were leftover from art school. They gave me a way of dealing with my own geographic and emotional situation.

TRF: So had you had the subjects of those paintings inside you for a long time as images? Or was it that when you began painting, you were able to express your feelings about your upbringing and the region and that was the visual form that they took?

JLC: I think that set of ideas started with my dissertation because my dissertation [on representations of Quakers in American culture] dealt with bonnets as veils and as sexual metaphors. This question is making me realize now that I was trying to put the years of academic work that I had done to use in my artistic work as well. So yes, I think that's where that idea began, but I didn't really deal with it until I was dealing with it in a more personal way.

TRF: I can't believe I had never thought about that connection between your writing on the Quaker bonnet and those paintings.

JLC: It's a curious thing because I was not raised as a Mennonite, though I was a full participant in Mennonite life for many years. But I was very much interested in the Mennonite tradition of covering and the Christian tradition of women veiling more generally. That idea of women veiling was always really important to me, and I think I had to confront it and deal with it. Because I think about that commandment a lot that women should be covered any moment that they're in prayer, which of course should be every moment [Endnote 1]. Their heads have to be covered. There's so much online theology dealing with parsing that commandment and parsing the way just covering your hair is not enough; it's got to be a cloth covering.

TRF: And Orthodox Jewish women cover their hair with wigs.

JLC: Yes! I actually went to the synagogue in Harrisonburg and did a talk about women's covering in Islam and Judaism and Christianity. Because those women knew the sheitel very well, but they didn't know the varieties of Muslim covering and the varieties of Christian covering. What's fascinating is that the commandment to cover is the strongest in Christianity—it's present in Judaism and Islam but seems nonnegotiable in the New Testament. So yes, I love that stuff. If I ever write anything academic again, it will be on that subject because not enough has been done with it.

TRF: What would you say? Tell us—this is your chance to launch your theory!

JLC: I have a lot of thoughts about it. Because it's always perceived as innocent and virtuous and also understood as alluring and sexy and threatening. It's an endless recursion. Thankfully, now there are so many covered women online from all three of these Abrahamic traditions, talking about their own experience covering.

TRF: Who knew we would come so far from the Rachel Halliday [Endnote 2] of it all? Was it around that time that you also did some paintings of public figures—child Oprah, an ironically portrayed Ted Haggard?

JLC: I did those before I went to school. I was painting then in acrylic and I was painting really small because I was doing it in a way that was really practical. I went to an in-person interview at one of the places I had applied. And I had these very powerful Art Men interviewing me. It was just at the moment when you were still submitting your slides physically. So I had had my work photographed and had slides made. And they said to me—I had driven hundreds of miles to a different city for this interview—and this was the only question they had for me, "Why is your work so *small*?"

And I remember saying, and feeling pretty strongly about this answer, "My work is small because the space I where I work in my home is small. That is the space that is accessible to me. I'm a professor. I don't have a studio. I'm not professionalized. That's what I need to go to graduate school for." And I didn't get in. But I was always really proud of that answer because I felt like it was an acknowledgement of the reality faced by all people working in any medium: these are the materials that I have, this is the space that I have, this is what I'm making, and this is what I'm saying with it. I have thought a lot about that answer, and I stand by it.

TRF: It's a great answer because it takes your work out of that realm where it doesn't exist in the physical world, where it's not attached to its production, but just comes from pure genius without any constraints at all. Good for you—striking one for those of us who live in the world. But so those paintings you had done before—are those the ones you started

with, the paintings of public figures? Did you already know you wanted to work in portraiture?

JLC: Yes! The pull that I have toward portraiture is going to be really hard for me to ever step away from because it, like so much of my practice, is rooted in this idea that you depict things that are real, and you depict them with good likeness, and you do a good job by showing things as they are. Because of course, that is the kind of work that my parents would praise because it looks like the thing that it represents. So I think when I first started doing portraiture, that's what I was trying to do, as ever—to please my parents.

TRF: Did they like them?

JLC: I don't know if they have ever seen a lot of those early pieces. Of course, I wasn't trying to please them as much as I was trying to please their voice in my head. I knew that portraiture was what I was interested in—and that's what I'll always do. When you work in portraiture now, it's sort of the ultimate answer to "is art useful?" because portraiture is not useful and it hasn't been useful since the first daguerreotype was made, ever since the first photographic image [Endnote 3]. Portrait artists should have been out of business. But portrait artists are still trying to justify their existence and succeeding and doing incredible things. I find that a really interesting conversation as well.

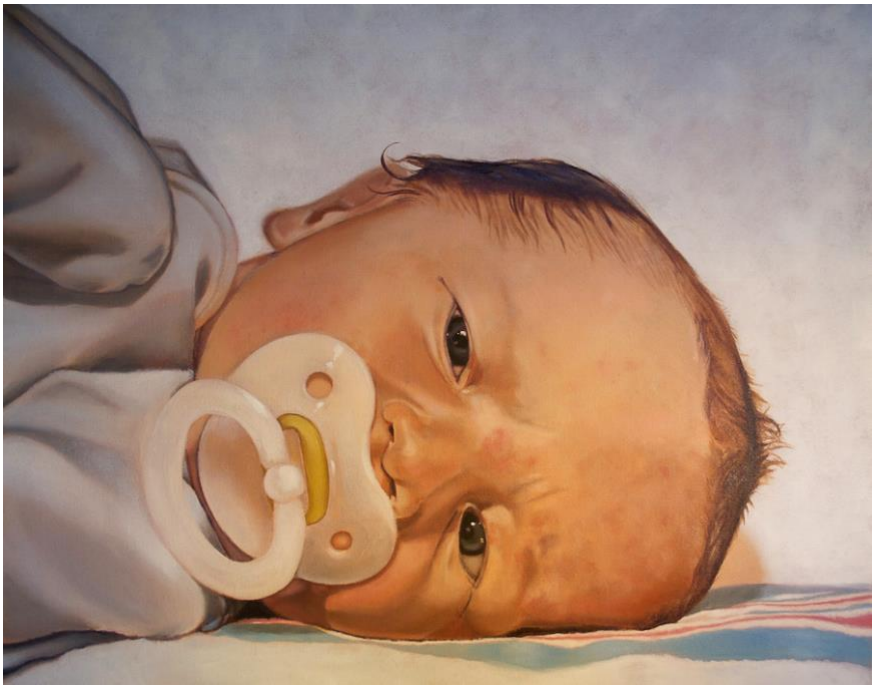
TRF: I'm curious about your choice to start with public figures as opposed to your parents or yourself as a child.

JLC: Hmm, I have not thought about that before.

TRF: Was it because you saw painting as another opportunity for critical work, like academic work?

JLC: That's possible. I have always been a little bit uncomfortable—and this is why I did not continue as a professor, though there were aspects of being a professor that I enjoyed. I really, really hate being looked at, and I don't want anyone to look at me, and so it took me a long time before I dealt with myself as a subject and before I would have dealt with anyone close to me. I don't want anyone to see me or to see much about me that is dear or personal. I would much rather have my vulnerability and my issues be viewed outside of my presence and outside of my existence. I love it when I make a painting and then give it away or sell it and don't see it anymore. That's a very satisfying moment! When I first started painting, it used to be hard for me to get rid of my work. Now I don't like having it around—I don't like seeing it.

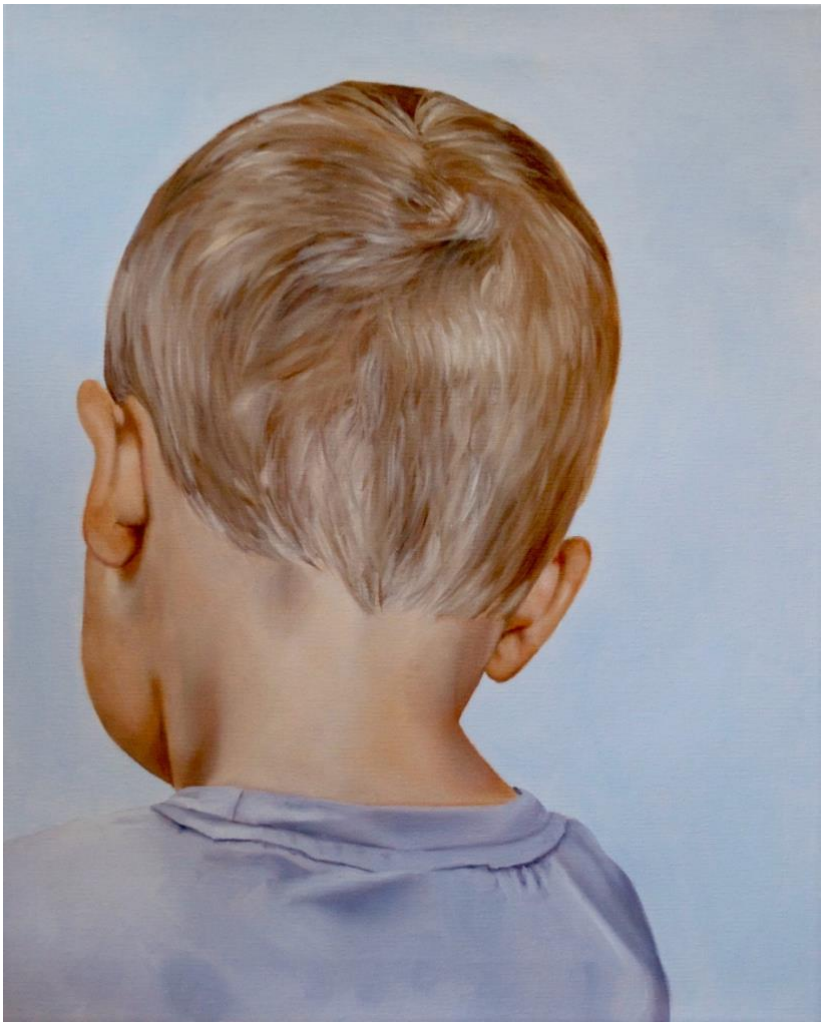
TRF: I'm interested in the shift that you made to the very bucolic farm animals that you were painting. I know that that also coincided with your fertility journey. Is that something you are interested in talking about?



Corrie Robert

JLC: Absolutely! Because I think I dealt with that in two ways. I made pictures for children and then I made pictures of children. I have a long series of pictures of babies.

TRF: Those baby pictures are amazing. Their eyes—the way you capture the folds of their skin, their downy hair.



Being Little

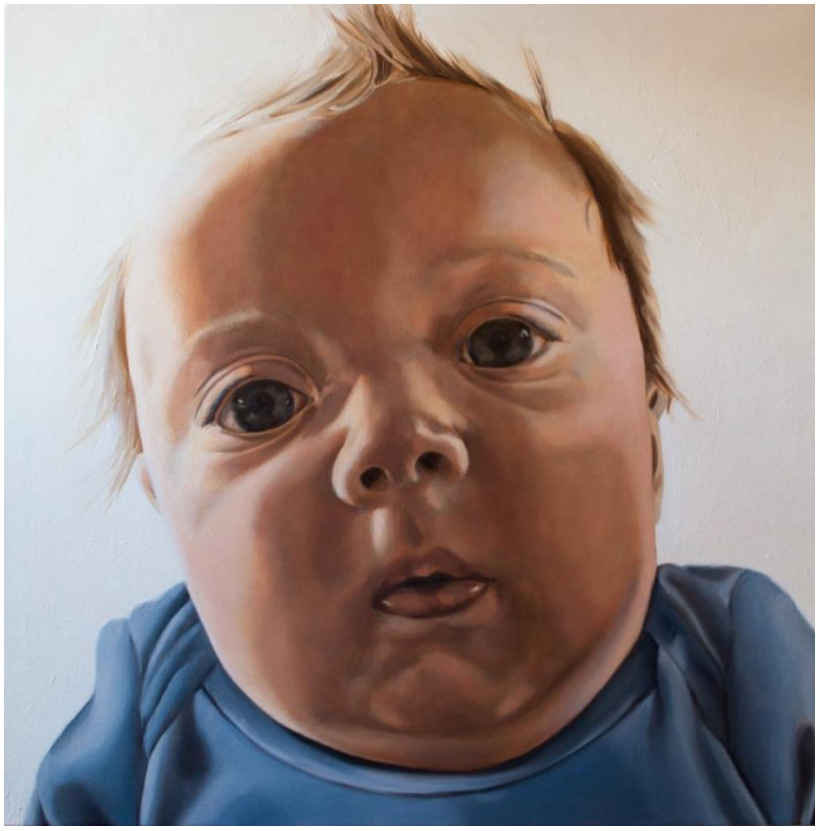
JLC: When I was still trying to understand how I would make money as an artist, there was a little shop for babies around the corner from our house in Harrisonburg, and the owners were very sweet, and one of the owners, I always remember her because she had become a mother very young, as many of the women in that area did because there was no sex education in Rockingham County, Harrisonburg City schools at the time. She herself was an entrepreneur and was interested in helping other women who were entrepreneurs, so I offered to do a series of nursery pictures for them to show and sell. They sold them and then wanted more. So I did those for a long time.

And I started thinking about how to deal with my infertility through painting babies. That was also freeing because it turns out very few people want to buy a picture of a baby they don't know. That was liberating because I was doing work that I was pretty comfortable no one was going to buy. Bless my mother, she loves me a lot and she was telling me, "You

know you did a great job selling those animal pictures, those nursery pictures." And so it was very, very liberating to start dealing with baby portraiture.

Not many contemporary portraitists have worked a lot with newborns or really little babies because newborns are super weird-looking. I was trying to push back on the school of Anne Geddes. I mean, I love her work because she makes newborns seem so lovely and beautiful, and they are that, but they're also so strange. When my daughter was born and they brought her to me, I looked at her and I had those feelings like you're supposed to have, but I also thought, "Aahh!"

So then when I was painting babies, I was painting babies I didn't know. I would go on stock photo websites, where people from all over the world--say, Russia--have uploaded photos of their families, and you can download the image and purchase the artistic use rights. To this day I haven't really painted babies that I know, except for commissions. I thought that when I had my own child, I would be painting them nonstop, but I haven't. I just haven't wanted to do that.



Untitled (oil on canvas)

TRF: That makes sense, given how you mentioned feeling about the gaze, that you wouldn't want to put her forth for consumption in that way.

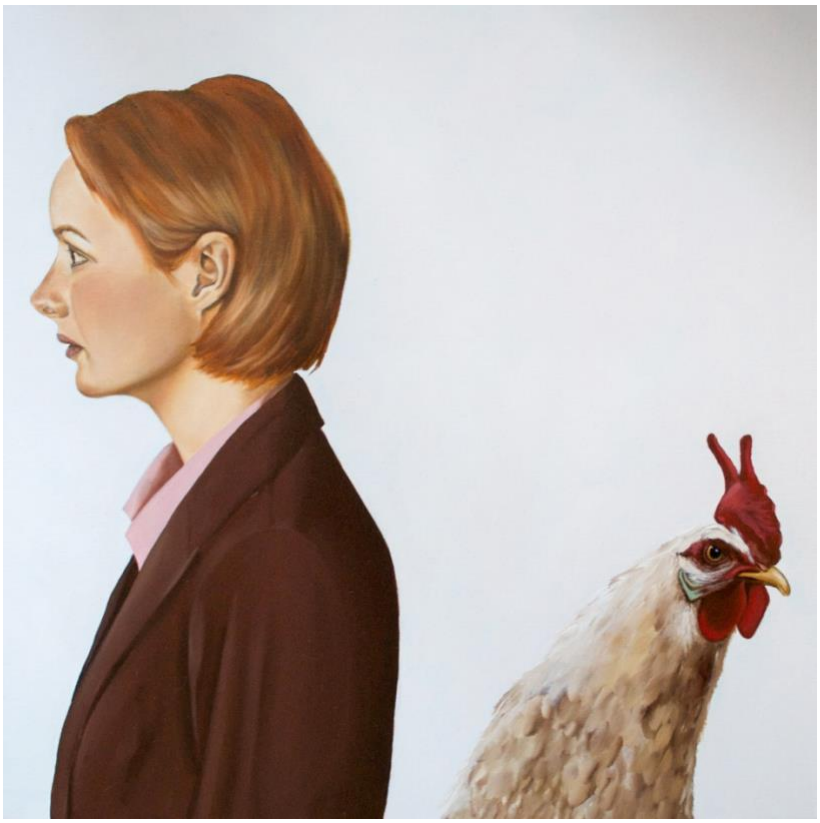
JLC: Yes, and using stock photos is also ethically complex because of course the subjects don't know how I am using them, although you can use those photos for anything. You could be using them to make an ad, or something commercial.

TRF: When you are painting a portrait, what are you trying to capture?

JLC: That's such an interesting question. Because I'm painting children, I'm usually working from a photograph because we have that luxury now, of not having to make children sit still for a portrait. And photographs flatten so much. They lighten the shadows on the face, and the roundness of the face. I'm trying to bring that roundness back.

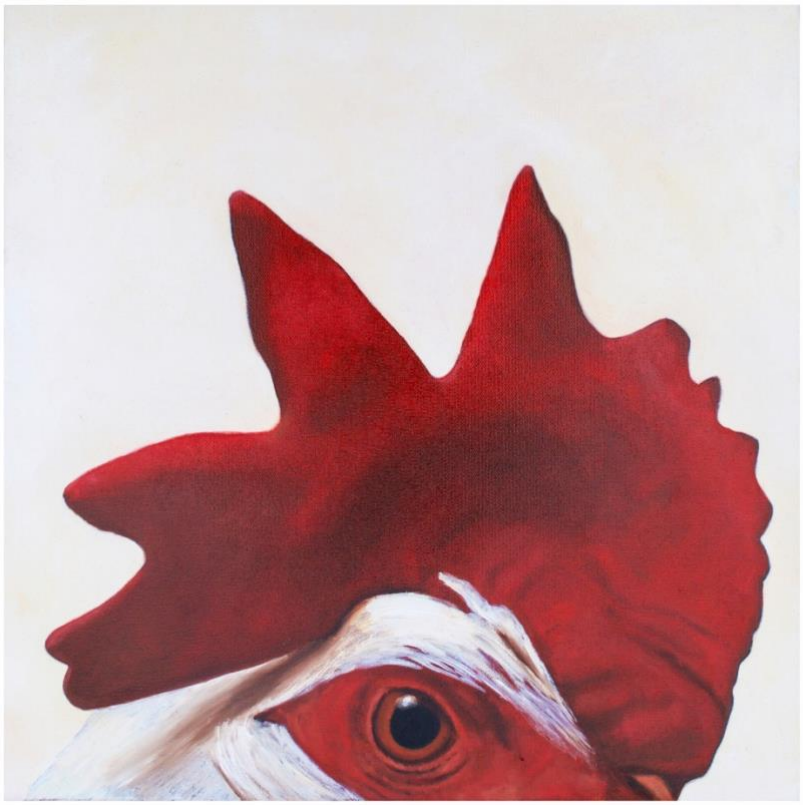
And I want to capture the lightness of a person—I'm trying most to get at their humor. Especially, a few times I've been asked to paint portraits of people who have died, and then I think it's important to try to bring that liveliness, which is most evident in their humor, and I think capturing that humor means a lot to the people who love them because that is something that you lose.

TRF: When you say that humor is what you're trying to represent, that makes so much sense. The nude bonnet paintings, the chickens in socks, the babies—in some ways the subjects are so disparate but the humor in the approach seems like something they have in common.



The Stalemate Enters the Second Day

JLC: I think back to those early chicken paintings, when I was painting lots of chickens. There was this one painting of chicken and a woman in a business suit—Katie has it now—and they're facing away from each other. It was just this way of capturing an imaginary and real conflict between human and animal. When we lived in the valley, there were so many chickens everywhere. And I loved it, but their lives were terribly sad if you thought about it. One of my favorite things that would happen was that sometimes you would be driving down the road, and a chicken would have escaped from one of those trucks going to a slaughterhouse. It would be standing in the middle of the road, looking confused. I would think, "Go, sister, this is your big chance!" They're so funny.



Little Eager Is All Grown Up (oil on canvas)

When I had my last show in Harrisonburg, it was of all of these chicken paintings, and the great irony was that it was sponsored by Shenandoah Valley Organic, a local chicken producer. And they actually provided, for the show, chicken for people to eat. So people were looking at these paintings that gave chickens this borrowed humanity—while eating chicken skewers. Of course, you can't think about it any time you eat chicken.

TRF: (after the laughing subsides) Are you painting mostly commissioned works these days?

JLC: Yes. Monday was my first day back to work since my daughter was born. She likes that I'm working. She used to think I was retired—her story was that I was retired because she knew her grandparents were retired, so she would tell people that. She likes that I'm a painter and that that's my job.

TRF: It's nice because a child knows what a painter does. It's not a job like being a tax attorney that a child can't understand.

JLC: She likes to draw. She likes to make drawing tutorials where I film her and she says, this is how you draw something. But thankfully she doesn't want to be an artist. She wants to be a mermaid.

Endnotes:

[1] See 1 Corinthians 11:5-16: "But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.
"A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.
"Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God." *The Bible*. New International Version, Biblica, 2011, www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2011%3A5-16&version=NIV.

[2] A character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* whose Quaker modesty, pacific nature, and omnicompetent domesticity make her a quintessential nineteenth-century maternal figure. Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Penguin Books, 1981.

[3] The daguerreotype was introduced to the public in 1839. Daniel, Malcolm. "Daguerre (1787-1851) and the History of Photography," *MetMuseum*, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dagu/hd_dagu.htm.