

Kissing My Friend

Written by Smoke Signals

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by Freida Theant

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The public knows me as a prize-winning artist, invited to interviews for magazines and talk shows, but that's far from how I started out.

But first, understand this: women enchant me when they light their cigarettes, when they expel their chalky, membrane-thin sheets from moist, barely spaced lips, and when they concave their cheeks and make taut their mouth around a slightly staining filter tip during a hungry pull. On those increasingly rare occasions where I happen across feminine smoking, I pause and watch them, transfixed. The memories of her smoky immersion, her cloudy delights of nasal and oral joy compel me afterwards to capture it on canvas and paper. But for years I felt that images of this kind were not to be shared. They aren't Art and they certainly aren't marketable.

So at the opening of my artistic career I repressed my urge to create such portraits. Naturally I concentrated on paintings that sell; commercial imagery, commissioned pictures of people's homes, and the traditional landscapes and cityscapes for outdoor art festivals. Honestly, it was a lackluster body of work; technically good, but that's all. Without some kind of flame to kindle my passions, I was trudging through a creative mire.

My turning point? One of those very same "smoking women" I love to view challenged me to paint a masterwork if I could handle the pressure.

I'll explain: at one of the Spring Art Festivals where I usually set up my display booth to sell my landscapes, a browser looking to be in her mid-thirties stepped in from the throng to check out my work. I remember her as willowy, medium height, noticeably tanned (unusual for early spring) and crowned by a wide brim sunhat that shaded those lovely golden tresses that tumbled in ringlets past her shoulders. Her sparse makeup, pastel blouse and white shorts were fashionable and expensive; a bit much for this street sale.

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I was surprised that she actually examined my paintings. Usually a sale follows, but she just took what looked like an overly elegant Benson and Hedges from her gilt cigarette case. Cigarette protruding carelessly from those deep red lips, she glanced my way before she fired her engraved silver lighter. Was she was asking my permission or daring me to stop her? After all, smoking inside was unusual, if not forbidden. But she would indulge her craving anyway; I knew that and the look in my eyes told her so. Besides I didn't want to jeopardize my pending sale, nor this fascinating woman's smoking episode.

Thinking back, she must have performed for my benefit. The ambient sunlight and its backlighting angle were ideal for displaying her exhales, sworls and plumes. Holding the flame a little under the cigarette's tip, its igniting face dawned like a morning sun and whitened with her steady draw. She forced the filter out from her pursed mouth like her lips would not let go, letting the wisp of a snowy streamer curl mischievously from her pout. Her breasts lifted; this was a smoker who drinks deeply and whose lungs wring every ounce of pleasure from each draft. Her mouth agape, she summoned the snowy current from deep within to waft it to freedom through her cherry hued lips. The endless, rolling tumbles splashed onto my painting. This piece shows a lake in predawn shadow and I had painted an area over the water where the mist rises. Her exhaled mist rebounded from its surface and it appeared to flow directly from lake itself.

She baptized my remaining canvases with rippling cones from her nostrils when they pleased her, and tight streams of smoke whooshing downwards from taut lips if they didn't.

"You handle mist and fog well," she said, fixing me with her grey eyes during one luxurious pull on her cigarette. Her eyes acknowledged that even though I had been scrutinizing her, she was aware, and approved.

"I think I'd like this painting for my collection. And one more thing," she lifted one of my business cards while handing me her American Express Platinum.

"Another painting?" I asked.

"I'm interested in having my portrait done," she said. "I want to commission an artist to paint my picture, but I have certain guidelines and restrictions." Tapping the ash, she paused the conversation with another of her leisurely draws on her cigarette, followed by what I thought to

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be a smoky yawn. But instead, the snowball of her captive smoke bulged forward momentarily from those red lips before sheeting upwards into her nose. A white membrane flowed to her delicate but hungry nostrils before disappearing from sight. And then, she inhaled, and finished her answer with smoky pulses of exhaled syllables, "I want the work done live; no photos for references. I'll sit for the sessions. And the pose will be as I determine it."

"I haven't painted many people," I protested. "You might be better off getting a portraitist."

Her lips tore a final, hot drag out of her dying cigarette, and she dropped it to the pavement to grind out. "I've watched you watching me. Other artists would not be near as....observant as you've been today."

I started to apologize, but she cut me off.

"Don't explain," she said. "What's important is that the artist portray me in my thoughtful mood and that's captured best while I'm enjoying a cigarette. Pensive elegance." She then indicated how much the finished piece would be worth to her, and I'll admit that even in a good year, I wouldn't earn that many dollars.

Flashing that exquisite silver lighter, she lit another of her elegant cigarettes and defined the terms of her offer punctuated by drags and between exhales: "You make sketches, for your studies, but they become my property. We'll do the sittings at my address, and the completion date must be within four months, using oils, on canvas, four by six feet. And I'll need to run a background check on you before we ink a contract."

The offer was tempting. Still, I hesitated.

She cut me off just as I spoke. She sensed my reluctance, "If this work takes you outside your comfort zone, wouldn't that be a growing experience?"

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She understood the creative process so I had to give in!

She wrote the date of our first session and “Sharon Morris” along with her phone and address on my business card. That left me a week to prepare.

Athletes work out, and actors and dancers rehearse to prepare for their big moment. Artists make numerous sketches.

I created a series of “smoking woman” images; ladies in drawn in graphite (pencil), usually bust, but sometimes full body length. The quality was weak, but life-like enough to continue variations on the figures, adding more with each new angle or pose. The unique difficulties of portraying feminine smoking are daunting: lighting and its relationship to the forms of smoke; the various patterns of her exhale; and the streamers of smoke from her cigarette during different phases of being smoked.

Smoking is a dynamic process, but the drawing is done in freeze-frame. How do I project that sense of activity in the finished piece?

It was discouraging; looking at my first attempts in sobering daylight, they appeared cartoon-like; the poses and gestures forced. You doesn't just draw a face and then jam a cigarette into it. The smoker engages her cigarette with her whole head and face, while her muscles, eyes, and lips are in mutual harmony with the erotic acts that comprise the lighting, inhaling, expelling and de-ashing. The delicate fingers of a woman cradle the living cigarette almost lovingly, but my first depictions had claws with a lifeless cylinder pinched between two fleshy prongs. And drawing the flame and cigarette just as its being lit? I felt that skill would take years to perfect.

But ready or not, I drove to her address on the appointed day. The house and grounds were as massive and elegant as I imagined them to be. Yes, a liveried maid answered the door and showed me into the great room, where my hostess joined me. “Please call me Sharon,” she offered. For this first session we tried various angles, poses and a few wardrobe changes, while I made a handful of charcoal sketches. She reviewed the results, some trials were just okay; others exciting.

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For our following session I modified the process. I moved to jet black paper, using either white chalk or white ink, and sometimes both. It was an excellent choice! Smoke is white, ditto the delicate skin of the cigarette and her skin tones. Black paper creates a nocturnal atmosphere which enriches the sensual aspect of her smoking. She tends to be more contemplative, relaxed or aroused than in the unsympathetic glare of the white paper.

And the smoke! Billows of creamy, thick white smoke finally got their full values in this format. Streamers of smoke that shaded everywhere from alabaster white to the barest transparent film now riveted the eye in the finished pieces. And her cigarette likewise shone out, its frosty skin now successfully competing for the eye as the focal point. The ash at last expressed itself in much more muted whites and grays, whose coarse surface differed from the smooth, mat-finish of the rice paper. After that session, Sharon now had an impressive series of artworks portraying her in various phases of her pensive smoking. She burned up a pack of cigarettes deciding which drawings to model as the final image but the sense of the thing was now before us, as I outlined the portrait on canvas.

Over the succeeding months, I made nearly three dozen trips to her home to paint in all the details. At first, she sat each session, expelling her smoke liltily and staring off into the distance. As the painting filled in, I didn't need her as often and by the final sessions, not at all. From that point, I covered the canvas before leaving. The finale should be a surprise.

At the moment of the unveiling, she stared at the uncovered portrait wordless.

What she saw was how my techniques and knowledge of her gestures finally blended: to give the smoke and the faint glow of her cigarette their maximum effect, I emphasized them through contrast, against a darkened twilight. Sharon appears partially in shadow, seated at a three-quarters angle, almost facing the viewer, but her grey eyes are focused away, on infinity. Her curved fingers cradle her beloved cigarette in a gentle "V", while her lips project a bit over the filter tip in a tender embrace. Sharon's aristocratic cheeks and nose, mostly in shadow, are only slightly illuminated by the cigarette's glowing ember. The nostrils, fountain like, spray swirling ringlets of smoke, tumbling in fluffy ever-diminishing plumes outward. It portrays her drawing on her cigarette while exhaling within the same magical moment, something that so typifies Sharon's provocative, pensive side.

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She finally commented “My expectations were high, but I wasn’t sure if anyone could really capture me in a painting. It’s so much better than I had....”

One of her neighbors next to her added, “You’re kissing an old friend! It’s marvelous.”

The unofficial title became, “Kissing My Friend” though the piece is cataloged as “Portrait of Sharon Morris.” Initially Sharon limited the people she allowed to view her portrait to personal intimates. Most were impressed, and at times, asked her to sell them a few of the practice sketches I had completed. She parted with a few that way, but eventually, galleries got the word and clamored for sketches from her collection. Sharon recovered part of her outlay in the profitable sales that resulted and my name got mentioned a lot in the high-end art circles. Public acclaim feeds itself and I took advantage of the momentary fame to develop a broader base. That’s how I became the artist that the public recognizes today.