

# Second Place Winner

## Bly Pope

An artist turns portraits of loved ones into masterpieces of familial affection.

BY JENN REIN

**“Regarding technique,”** says juror of awards Cuong Nguyen, “it’s clear that the artist has good drawing skills, and his knowledge about value is excellent,” but Bly Pope’s second-place-winning drawing *My Father, Tom Pope*, grabbed Nguyen’s attention on a deeper level as well. “I love the way the artist portrays his father, with the eyes staring straight at the viewer,” he says. “When I look at this piece, I can’t help but feel curious about what was on the subject’s mind. I admire the beautiful details as well as the patience the artist had to have to create them. Most of all, the emotion of this drawing wins my heart, and that’s why I chose it to be among the top three.”

Pope’s intent behind the photorealistic portrait was anchored in the intelligence behind his father’s eyes. “He’s a professor who just retired,” Pope says. “He taught Shakespeare and film, and great directors like Hitchcock and Kubrick. He was actually a screenwriter for more than 25 years in Hollywood before he became a teacher. He’s very sharp and observant, and I wanted the drawing to convey this through his lively, bright eyes.”

The artist finds himself hard at work trying to document those people in his life who are close to his heart. “I’m in this ‘masterpiece’ mindset,” he says. “When I’m not doing commissions, I want to spend a year or two (or more) on creating lasting mementos of the people I love.” This latest piece depicting his father’s intense, wise eyes is part of a family of works that include portraits of Pope’s mother and grandmother. “When I’m creating,” he says, “I’m remembering these moments in my life. That contributes to the quality of the piece—it’s almost a meditative process.”

As a finalist in the Smithsonian’s triennial Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, in 2013, with his grandmother’s portrait, *Maryanna* (page 14), Pope’s contribution to photorealism within the parameters of these works is nothing but personal.

### TAILORING TECHNIQUE

Pope uses a single reference photo to create his photorealistic pieces and does so with a grid system that has been tailored to his own unique perception and ability to “see” the finished drawing throughout the creation process. “I print off the



Bly Pope ([popebrothersart.org](http://popebrothersart.org)) graduated from Stanford University and received his M.F.A. at the University of Minnesota, where he has been an adjunct professor for more than 10 years. He has also been an adjunct professor at Minneapolis College of Art and Design for the last seven years. The artist’s work has appeared in numerous exhibitions and received several awards. His drawing, *Maryanna*, was selected to be a part of the National Portrait Competition Exhibition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery from 2013–2014 and was purchased by the Minneapolis Institute of Art for its permanent collection in 2017. His work has been a part of exhibitions at the Heuser Art Gallery, in Peoria, Illinois; Larson Gallery, in St. Paul, Minnesota; and the People’s Gallery, the American Swedish Institute and Katherine Nash Gallery, all in Minneapolis. Pope’s artwork is also part of public collections at The Cafesjian Museum of Fine Art, in Armenia, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, in Minneapolis.

**MY FATHER, TOM POPE** (pencil on paper, 37x25)



**MARYANNA**  
(graphite and  
ink on illustration  
board, 38x31)

image in the actual size I want the drawing to be, then cut it up into rectangles,” he says. To create *My Father, Tom Pope*, for example, the artist carved out 20 rectangles. He then layers sections of the photo on top of the drawing, flipping up a section of photo as he works on the drawing beneath. (To see a video of this process, visit <https://youtu.be/aBJ4CuMTogY>).

Pope adapts to the manner in which his brain processes data by modifying the traditional grid technique, as used by photorealists such as Chuck Close. “I’m envisioning the after-image in my mind as I’m drawing on the paper,” he says. “That allows me to translate the photographic

information as accurately and truthfully as I can. I want to be faithful to the photo.” Pope takes hundreds of photographs of his subject, selecting the image that he feels most authentically reflects the person’s spirit.

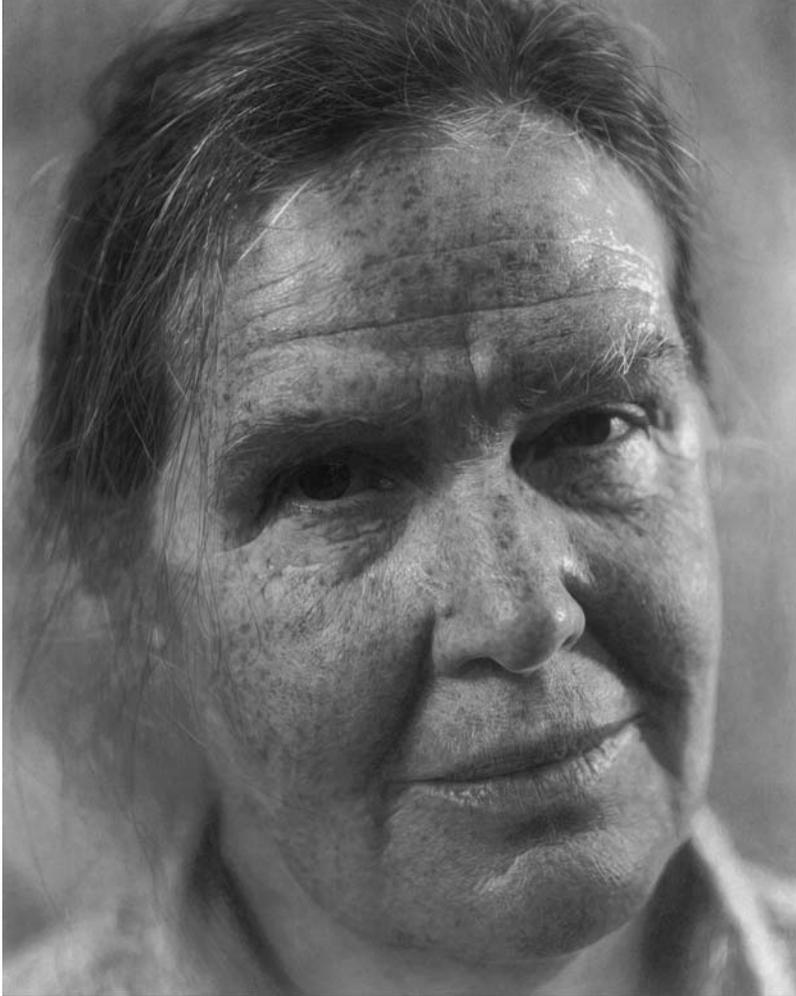
The artist’s tools include mechanical pencils, mechanical eraser sticks, micron pens and Q-tips. “It sounds like a weird choice, but a Q-tip really serves to soften the marks that create the scaffolding that’s the underlayer,” he says. Pope’s use of value, which was clearly admired by the juror, starts with addressing the darkest darks and the lightest of lights. He describes the direction to which the values led him in this particular drawing, “From the top left of his forehead down to the bottom right of his chin,” says the artist.

It’s in the second layer, in which Bly lays down the crisp details, that his work is lifted to a truly exceptional level of artistry. Nguyen’s input, again, voices the impact of Pope’s approach on the viewer. “You can see all of the small strokes, as well as the softness the artist carefully created around the head to let details of his father’s facial features pop out,” Nguyen says. Even still, a third layer aids in refining what the artist describes as, “The important stuff I missed.”

### **STRUCTURE VS. FLUIDITY**

Pope is drawn to photorealism because he loves the approach—in all its structured methodology, but he also believes that artists shouldn’t limit themselves to a single genre. “I taught myself how to use oils because a client wanted a series of seabirds,” Pope says. “I think, as an artist, you have to continue to adapt—and a broader skill set simply makes you more adaptable.”

When viewing the work he has accomplished in oil, one can easily see Pope’s ability to depict nature with a deep sense of accuracy in light and shadow. There’s also, however, an open, gestural style to his oil paintings that seems to contradict the structure that’s needed for the work he accomplishes in pencil. “I like the meticulous detail of the pencil drawings,” Pope says, “but that work is far less loose and



[LEFT]

**FREYA MANFRED**

(graphite on illustration board, 38x31)

[BOTTOM LEFT]

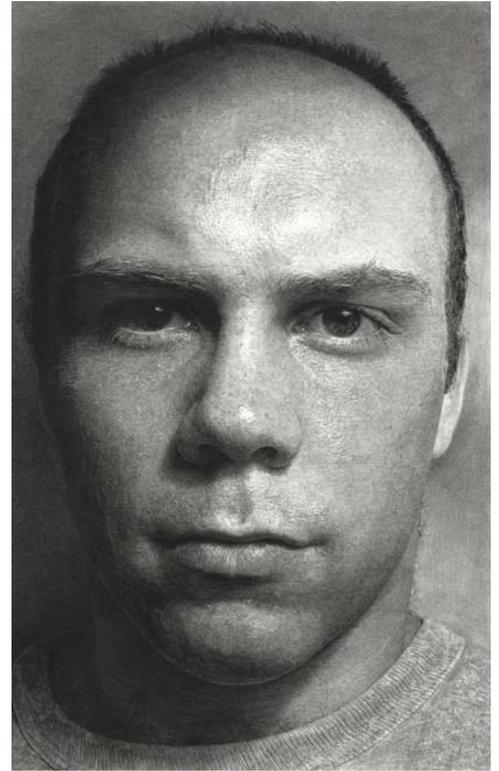
**FARM FIELD**

(graphite on paper, 10x8)

[BELOW]

**AMOS**

(graphite on paper, 14x11)



expressive than the kind of work I did in college. The oil brings out that expressiveness.”

In his role as an art instructor, Pope finds that the energy and enthusiasm his students impart feeds his own sense of discovery. It will be something to see the evolution of his work as he continues to explore oil while at the same time pursuing his explorations of photorealism. “It’s important for your own mindset to know how to grow while creating,” he says. “The world doesn’t live in black and white; it’s all color. You have to know how to create that world, too. Every piece of art teaches you something.”

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