

SEQUESTERED-An Artistic Testimony

3/15/23 draft

by Nicholas Rayder

A bit of my background:

I was born in the 1940s in New Jersey and began drawing and painting in high school. My teenage years included frequent journeys to New York City, merely 22 miles away from my home, where I experienced the vitality and immense variety of New York City.

I learned of the “Ashcan School” artists when I was enrolled in Lycoming College as an art major in 1959. The Ashcan artists were also known as the “The Eight” and included John Sloan, Robert Henri, George Luks, Edward Hopper, et al. They specialized in painting urban realities, such as street life, back alleys with hanging clotheslines, and the proverbial ashcans of the city.

While in college, I began painting city scenes following in the Ashcan tradition.



My art would take a back seat for several years while pursuing a PhD in Psychology. However, even in the “back seat,” I would digress from my studies and turn to my art to express my creativity and get me through the stresses of academia. Art was always a good friend to turn to.

I often summarize the role art played in my life with the words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. He wrote:

“Art enables us to be ourselves and to loose ourselves...at the same time.”

Over the years I used watercolor and ink in Ashcan-like pictures, sharpened wooden sticks to draw with, like Ben Shahn, dripped, rolled and threw paint onto large paper like Pollock, or I would create a whole bunch of abstracts using paint color samples I collected from Lowes and Home Depot.

My art took a noteworthy shift in 2019. The world seemed to be disintegrating and moving into a giant abyss of hate, division and anger. The more I read the newspapers and watched the news on television, the graver my concerns became about our society. I then chose to use my art to raise issues and portray specific political statements.

One day I saw a picture on the front page of Sunday’s *New York Times* showing two emaciated children, crying and surely dying on the floor of a hospital in Venezuela. I wondered: How can this be? Why were these children left unattended? Why were we not caring for one another? I paused to collect myself, only to discover an atrocious contrast a few moments later. There, in the art section of that very same paper, a painting of a screaming face, remarkably similar to the emaciated child’s face from the front page, sold at auction for \$50.4 million dollars!



I did the above collage to express injustice and hypocrisy in our society. The crosses represent prayers I said for each child.

In another New York Times article, “Brazil’s Corruption Scandal, Fears About Scraping By,” it showed a poor Brazilian barrio built from cardboard and scavenged wood. I contrasted it with posh flamenco dancers. I pasted colorful paper bits and did some ‘writing in’ with white ink to show that even in the density and squalor of living in cardboard huts, there still exists creativity, and hope.



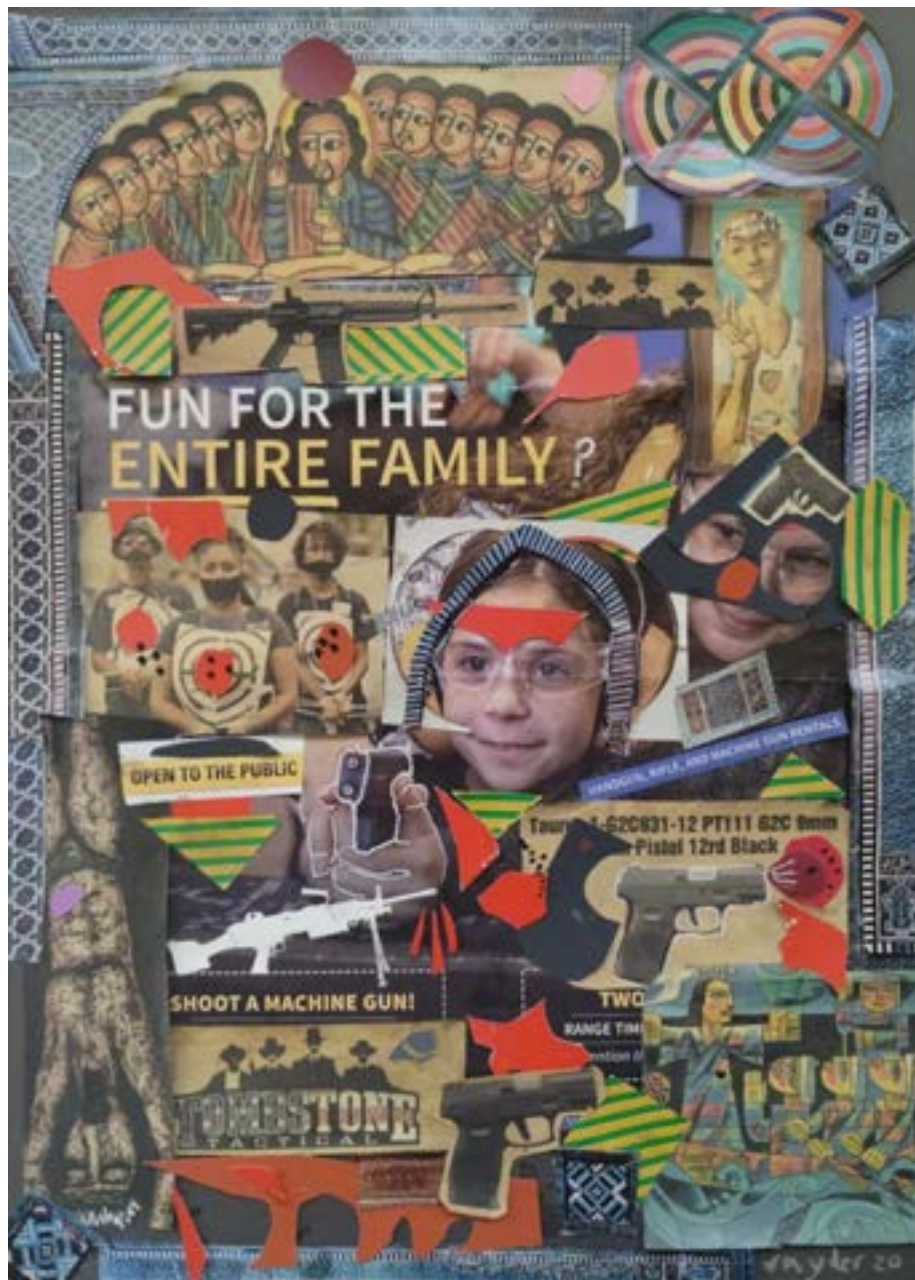
Memorial Day came, as did the newspapers showing simple, bland postage-stamp-size pictures of our soldiers who died in the wars. I felt the photos should be placed in a magnificent, colorful, cathedral-like setting, rather than displayed in ordinary lines and columns.



Another article in the New York Times titled “Inside a Deadly American Summer,” showed the photos of a large number of innocent people randomly killed in numerous mass shootings during one summer. I was upset at the loss of life, and again, how each person’s photo was in simple and bland stamp-size pictures. I cut out the article and adorned the photos with streams of color with a picture of Jesus blessing them.



Using a magazine ad promoting guns and titled “*Fun for the Entire Family*,” I did a collage as an anti-gun statement to confront mass shootings in America. In this collage a mother can be seen watching over her daughter holding a pistol pointed at a hanging upside down Jesus. An image depicting the last supper at the top of the collage is juxtaposed with protestors holding shooting targets, pictures of hand guns and AK 47’s.



I then did “*Honoring Our Workers*,” a collage that honors all the people who put their own safety and health aside to help people suffering from the Covid pandemic.



Perturbed by the increasing social and political dissidence in our country, I wished for help from the previous federal administration, and created a collage I called “*Obama, Where Are You?*”



Following the 2020 George Floyd protests, civil rights and police reform took center stage in national politics, yielding enormous support for the “Black Lives Matter” movement. Groups offering diverging agendas came into the limelight, resulting in combative rhetoric and an increase in social tensions. I was inspired to create a dramatic collage using only paint color samples I titled “Black Lives Matter.”



The 2020 presidential election was looming and with all the social unrest and misinformation in the press, I felt that I wanted to become more actively involved. I wanted to promote politicians like Joe Biden for president, David Ortega, the first Hispanic running for mayor of Scottsdale, and the Black Lives Matter movement. I put signs on my truck and handed out brochures at polling sites.



My signs caused several confrontations with rather angry people. I was yelled at, called names and once had to alert the police to avoid getting mugged. My brother strongly advised me, “Remove the signs before something serious occurs!” I did.

As the historic pandemic shutdown continued, I became sequestered and people around the world were affected in profound and unpredictable ways. Many were displaced, moved, lost employment, and confronted numerous identity struggles. On the national level, protesting, rioting, looting, and various forms of civil unrest continued. It seemed as though the entire nation was struggling to find its character and I responded to this national identity crisis with the collage *“The Struggle to Determine What We Want to Be and Where to Live.”*



As the pandemic waned, life gradually returned to some semblance of normalcy. My collages correspondingly depict an optimistic outlook. As things improved I started doing some more positive pieces. My collage, “*A Reason to Go to the Movies*,” echoes the happy return of public entertainment.



On another Sunday, a New York Times article displayed a collection of 1500 Pez candy dispensers. I made the picture into a collage called “*Lucy and the Pez Collection*.” Can you find her? The little mechanical Pez dispensers recall my carefree childhood memories of sharing candy with friends, simply enjoying life and all the sweets it has to offer!



I would like to show these issue-related collages in a discussion-group setting. You can review much of my art in my book, "Rayder Art," on my web site: www.nicholasrayder.com.

I would be pleased to hear from you.

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