

INTELLIGENCER

The Group Portrait: A Rooftop Artists' Salon

Figure drawing alfresco.

By Emilia Petrarca

"I FEEL VERY MUCH LIKE I'm being welcomed into a circle of excellence," said Daphne Always, a cabaret performer, model, and musician, before disrobing and stepping gracefully onto a crate. She had been invited by the painter Will Cotton to pose for one of his figure-drawing sessions, which he was hosting en plein air on the roof of Ryan McGinness's Soho studio. Gathered around Always were a bunch of New York artists—the youngest in their early 20s, the eldest in their 60s—working in a range of styles and mediums.

Some, like Rebecca Chamberlain, Inka Essenhigh, and Guy Richards Smit, were old friends who have been attending Cotton's sessions since 2002, when he began hosting them at his Lower East Side loft. Others, like Joseph Olisaemeka Wilson, were joining for the first time. "These are, like, the hyperrealists of New York," said Wilson, whose work tends to be more abstract. "I can't even hang with these guys." Over the course of the afternoon, the artists sketched and painted. Watercolors were mixed in empty wineglasses; markers and pastels were strewn about. Hilary Harkness, whose paintings feature dozens of miniature figures, sculpted Always out of clay.

It was the first session after a winter hiatus. "If you don't draw for a while, you forget how," Cotton said. Two decades ago, when he wanted to bring figures back into his work—a move that would define his career—he realized he had "gotten rusty" and needed to pick up sketching again. "I thought I might as well have friends over," he said. Soon, the figure-drawing salons became so popular that Cotton had to start capping attendance. (Past attendees have included the fashion designer Cynthia Rowley and the late actor Philip Seymour Hoffman.)

Making fine art can be a solitary profession, but figure drawing is often a group activity. "It's productive socializing," McGinness said. David Humphrey, a painter and sculptor, agreed: "A session like this causes me to articulate with a different confidence for the whole week after."

Just as Always switched to a sitting pose, a bro type on a neighboring rooftop reminded the group that they weren't alone. "Show us your tits!" he shouted. Nobody broke focus. ■





CLOCKWISE,
FROM LEFT:
*Anastasiya Tarasenko,
David Humphrey,
Anna Park,
Anna Weyant,
Joseph Olisaemeka Wilson,
Daphne Always,
Rebecca Chamberlain,
Ryan McGinness,
Will Cotton,
Alison Elizabeth Taylor,
Guy Richards Smith,
Steve Mumford,
Inka Essenhigh, and
Hillary Harkness.*
FAR RIGHT:
*Kaspar Mumford
(Essenhigh and
Mumford's son).*