



Grateful, oil on linen, 18" x 14"

UNCONSTRAINED

*Robert Maniscalco incorporates endless creativity
into his portrait paintings and fine art projects*

by DANA W. TODD



left: Portrait of Mayor Joe Riley, oil on linen, 30" x 25"
right: Firefly, oil on canvas, 24" x 18"

YOU MAY OR MAY NOT KNOW THE NAME OF ARTIST Robert Maniscalco, but you probably know about some of the headlining portraits he has painted and drawn. Just a few weeks ago, The Citadel unveiled Maniscalco's commissioned portrait of Charleston Mayor Joe Riley, a 1964 Citadel graduate, to add to the college's Hall of Fame. Maniscalco painted the mayor using inspiration from a photo taken of him 20 years ago along with one he took himself of Riley posing on his front porch last spring. It was Maniscalco's job to use his unique painting process, which he has developed over 45 years of painting portraits, to realistically capture the properties of light and shade in a style he calls expressive realism, capturing the sun shining on the mayor's face as well as encapsulating his character and personality in the painting.

"I spent time talking with Mayor Riley and Mrs. Riley, and we settled on his signature pose and outfit that evokes the brand he became known for in his 41 years of service to the city," says Maniscalco. "I always try to get out of the way and paint what's in front of me. I have no ego as a portrait artist; I don't bring my own agenda and allow the person I'm painting to come through."

True crime followers may be familiar with Maniscalco's pastel drawings of mass murderer Dylann Roof and convicted former police officer Michael Slager during their federal court trials. National media outlets hired Maniscalco to attend the trials as a sketch artist and capture the details of the proceedings since cameras were not allowed in the courtrooms.

While famous—or infamous—people have been the subject of the artist's paintings, he also captures many portraits of

"regular" people. "My commissioned portraits are leaving a legacy that will last long past my lifetime. The same is true for the multigenerational family portraits I paint. They are creating a legacy for those families, too," he says.

Maniscalco comes by his creative background naturally. His father, renowned portrait artist Joseph Maniscalco, who painted movie star portraits for 20th Century Fox Studios, trained him in the Frank Reilly Method of painting. The Reilly Method focuses on the lightness or darkness of colors, which Maniscalco says is freeing for the artist when it comes to choices of hue and color intensity. He has expanded upon the methodology in his quest to perfect portraiture and his non-commissioned paintings. Over time, he modernized the palette to intensify the colors. "The method is useful in creating a sense of sunlight, temperature and humidity in a painting," Maniscalco explains. He describes his expressive realism style as painting abstract forms, also known as broken color, that create the illusion of detail. He authored the book *The Power of Positive Painting* as a guide to his method and uses it as a teaching tool for both fledgling and seasoned artists.

While Maniscalco is best known for his portraiture, he also is an author of five books, an actor and director, a trained musician and the former TV host of the Detroit PBS show *Art Beat*. A perpetual student of the creative arts, he put himself through music school and later acting school by painting portraits. Today, he is a self-styled professional creative, merging his love of music, poetry, acting and painting into plays that combine artistic disciplines. Originally from Detroit, he got a fresh start in Charleston in 2006, refocusing on his painting career in what he calls "monk-like



The McConnen Family, oil on linen, 36" x 45"

devotion” to the craft. Even though portraits continue to be his main focus, Maniscalco enjoys flexing his creative muscles in other disciplines when an opportunity presents itself. In 2018 and 2019, he wrote, directed and acted in a multidisciplinary play called *Vincent John Doe* that appeared at Piccolo Spoleto. It combined music, painting and theater into a play predicated upon the idea of Vincent van Gogh miraculously coming to life in our time period.

When not painting portraits, Maniscalco paints in other fine art genres, preferring to create series of works. One example is *Chromo Sapient: Love Poems on Politics, Religion and Sex with Artwork*, a collection of original poetry and images that dives deeply into meanings behind some of his more iconic paintings. Other series include *Faces of the Lowcountry*, landscapes and wildlife. Another series, *The Quench Project*, includes a book, a documentary and 25 paintings documenting Maniscalco’s trip to Haiti and Haitians’ struggle to obtain fresh water. “It is a visual reminder of the indomitable human spirit to overcome adversity that will inspire and remind you that we’re all part of a greater whole, creating a world of diversity and inclusion,” he explains. He donates part of the proceeds from this series to The Bread of Life Orphanage in Haiti, as well as to two brothers he befriended who have since left the safety of the orphanage. His goal is to bring them to Charleston as part of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services parole program.

Maniscalco’s work is part of more than 1,000 public and private collections in North America. Throughout all of his creative endeavors, he identifies a common thread: His work reflects people’s basic need to express and understand the human condition and celebrate how we can come together to overcome adversity and become our best selves.

Above all, Maniscalco is interested in creating a safe place for the exchange of ideas. Collectors can buy his original artwork directly from his online gallery and at the Charleston Artist Guild in Downtown Charleston. His online gallery also serves as an extensive art resource about the creative process. He loves talking to people about their ideas and how they can work together to bring them to fruition, whether that takes the form of a family portrait or a painting made from photographs of a recent trip. *

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