

FAITH AND THE ARTS

Faces of Courage: Artist gives immigrants high profile on canvas

By Pamela A. Lewis

“Anger” is not the word that comes to mind when looking at Betsy Ashton’s portraits, which include those of prominent figures such as actor Hal Hollbrook and Philip Lader, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom. The walls of her sunlit New York studio are lined with her paintings, from which serene and pensive faces meet the viewer’s gaze.

Yet Ashton asserts that anger inspired her to paint what eventually will become 18 lifesized portraits of immigrants. She has worked on the project, titled “Portraits of Immigrants: Unknown Faces, Untold Stories,” since shortly after the 2016 presidential election.

“I was so angered by the maligning of immigrants and refugees ... which continues to this day, that I felt compelled to seek out immigrants, paint them and

tell their stories,” she said. “They are not a threat to America, but an asset; they need to be seen and heard.”

Once completed, the portraits will represent a cross-section of documented and undocumented immigrants of different ages, countries and cultures who presently live and work in New York. Ashton uses paint and brushes to tell the story of these latest arrivals to the city.

Proudly cradling a magnificent loaf of bread, Edilson “Eddie” Rigo, for example, smiles warmly from the canvas. Violent robberies forced him and his Italian parents from their native São Paulo, Brazil, and eventually from the country itself to seek better employment. Following a series of successes and failures, Rigo opened an espresso bar in a customer’s building, where he makes, Ashton says, the best coffee, soups, salads and sandwiches in Long Island City, Queens, N.Y. (where her studio is



Photo/Steven Speliotis

Betsy Ashton stands in her New York studio with several of the immigrant portraits.

located). Rigo calls America “the best place in the world,” citing its safety and vibrant cultural life.

Ashton’s personal and professional journeys have been almost as circuitous as those of the immigrant men and women whose likenesses she has captured on canvas. Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and reared in central New Jersey, from childhood she always “made up stories and drew pictures.”

She studied art but quit three credits shy of a master of fine arts in painting. She gained experience as an illustrator and as an art teacher for three years in a tony school district in Fairfax, Va.

“I wanted to do my own art,” she said. “But I soon became aware that the art world [of the late 1960s and early ’70s] didn’t like what I liked. It was interested in nonfigurative art, such as by Jean Davis [known for his masking tape-created stripes]. That didn’t speak to me; I’m a story teller.”

Nicholas Freeman, then-FCC Chairman, suggested Ashton assemble art-related projects that could be aired on television. She created a program for the show “Panorama,” teaching art once a week for \$50. She was later tapped to do radio reports on the burgeoning women’s

movement, for which she interviewed her subjects about equal pay for equal work and the emerging use of “Ms.”

Ashton then moved to reporting and anchoring radio and television news, first in Washington, D.C., and later at CBS News in New York. In 1977, she returned to Washington and was assigned to cover the courts for WJLA-TV, becoming the only TV reporter to draw her own courtroom sketches while covering trials.

Twelve years ago, she resumed painting at the encouragement of painter Everett Raymond Kinstler, who became her mentor. She also studied with Sharon Sprung and Mary Beth McKenzie at the National Academy School in New York. After two years, she opened a studio and began painting portraits on commission.

Concerning her current project, Ashton, who is Episcopalian, said she had no doubt that God suggested she paint the portraits of these immigrants who can’t afford to commission them. This is her way, she said, to “counter negativity and divisive thought.”

“I am not motivated by money, but have been willing to give up the income to do something right. I lived in wealth but am happier now,” she said. “I went to church but was not really ‘there.’ I was interested in the next big story. But I’ve gone back to the Lord.”

Ashton has asked friends, fellow parishioners and immigrant-aid groups to help find immigrants willing to pose. Some declined out of fear of deportation, she said. “I’ve changed names and omitted details that could cause harm to the undocumented, and have offered to paint them in shadow.”

Ashton sketches and photographs each person before painting. Her style reflects her favorite artists, “the brushy realists” such as John Singer Sargent, Diego Velázquez and Anthony van Dyck, she said. “Their deep beauty and humanity speak to me, because I want a human connection.”

Among her subjects is Maria Salomé, whose erect bearing belies her harrowing story of leaving Guatemala after her husband abandoned her and their five children, ages 3 to 16. She had two choices: becoming a prostitute or hiring



Clockwise from upper left are portraits of Edie Rigo, John Lam, Diego Salazar and a woman who asked to be identified only as “Angel.”

Portrait Photos/Betsy Ashton

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BOOK REVIEW

Tickle and Griswold: two pillars of the church

Review by Shelley Crook

Two faith leaders with deep vocations; one a learned layperson, one a clergyman at the pinnacle of the church hierarchy. Both were central to the story of LGBTQ acceptance within the Episcopal Church; both share a lifelong interest in meditation, prayer, and interfaith dialogue. The subjects of these books have much in common, and the books themselves have much to commend them.

"A Life" is an intimate and unflinching portrait of the beloved writer Phyllis Tickle, who died in 2015 at the age of 81. Jon M. Sweeney, Tickle's official biographer, illuminates Tickle's oftentimes painful personal story — including a faith-informing near-death experience, a difficult marriage with a secret at its heart, several miscarriages, and seven children — in a tone that is scholarly yet also unflinchingly warm and compassionate.

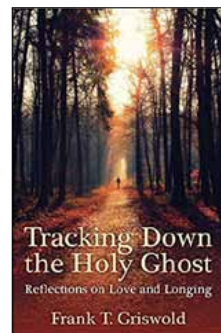
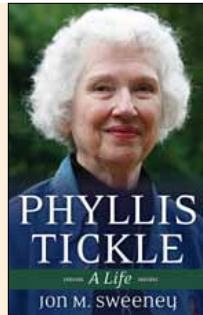
In her professional life, Tickle wore many hats: she was a teacher, the founding editor of the religion department at Publishers Weekly, a popular writer and public speaker, an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights, and a leading proponent of the Emerging Church movement. Sweeney provides a comprehensive, even granular, recounting of Tickle's achievements.

"Any woman who bears seven children to the same man doesn't get to call herself a feminist," Tickle joked, and indeed Tickle was criticized at various times of her life for being either too feminist, or not feminist enough. Still, the most cursory of glances over the chronology and list of publications at the start of "A Life" illuminates how groundbreaking Tickle was. When she died in 2015, the Episcopal Church lost a treasure and a constructive critic, feminism lost a trailblazer, and the world lost

a compelling theologian. This beautiful biography is an exhaustive record of, and fitting tribute to, the life of an extraordinary woman.

Tickle, excellent at pithy pronouncements, is useful for a segue: "The minute you own a piece of real estate, then you have to have somebody to clean it... then you have to get somebody to be sure that it's insured, and the next thing you know, you've got a bishop," she once

Phyllis Tickle: A Life
By Jon M. Sweeney
Church Publishing
288 pages, \$26.95



Tracking Down the Holy Ghost: Reflections on Love and Longing

By Frank T. Griswold
Church Publishing
176 pages, \$18.95

said, always suspicious of church hierarchy. Surprisingly, Frank T. Griswold, the 25th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, would agree with her.

"How ironic it is that I, who have always sat somewhat loose to the church-as-institution, should have found myself its chief pastor and symbolic head," Griswold writes in "Tracking Down the

Holy Ghost: Reflections on Love and Longing."

Griswold appears, if not a reluctant bishop, exactly, then reassuringly ambivalent about the positions he has held. Indeed, this book gives short shrift to those years; Griswold's true passion appears to lie somewhere other than church bureaucracy, in scripture, in prayer, and in an endless, curious engagement with world. Despite the lofty heights he's reached, Griswold comes off as self-effacing, always willing to make himself vulnerable. First and foremost, though, he presents as a natural born pastor.

The book is part memoir, part spiritual meditation, and Griswold is an excellent guide towards a more considered life. If you're a sucker for inspirational quotes, then this book is like hitting the motherlode. Griswold quotes from major thinkers in every tradition, from Teilhard de Chardin to T. S. Eliot to Tagore, but much of the book's wisdom comes from Griswold's own pen.

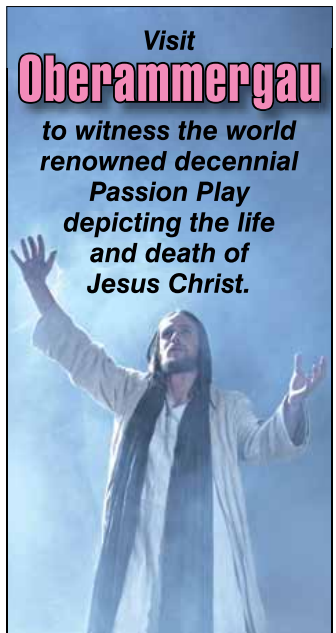
"Though many of us like things to be black or white... Love makes it possible to live with paradox," he says, a maxim I intend to cling to like a drowning woman to a life raft when I next view my Twitter feed. Indeed, many of Griswold's insights are relevant to our current climate, where tribalism and disrespect reign. Having led the church through a major conflict — the ordination of openly gay clergy, which brought the denomination to the point of schism — Griswold knows something about division (and, similar to Tickle, he was criticized at that time both for being both too progressive, and not progressive enough.)

This book is kind and unshakably moderate, in a world where kindness is underrated and moderation is... well, if not dead, then definitely on life support. If you need a rest from the news and the prevailing culture, some ideas on how to

proceed in faith or how to pray, or you simply want to revel in the mystery — this book is wonderfully calm and meditative — then "Tracking Down the Holy Ghost" is for you.

Tickle and Griswold are modern pillars of the church. They remind us of the importance of strong voices, both lay and clerical, that are willing to challenge the institutional status quo while upholding those things — prayer, scripture, our baptismal covenants — that are really important. ■

Shelley Crook is a New York-based writer.



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a "coyote" to sneak her into the United States.

Unwilling to do "indecent work," Salomé made a "very scary journey" through Mexico until a bus picked up her group and brought them to New York, where, soon after, she was hired as a housekeeper. She sent home money to feed her children for 24 years before obtaining a green card, allowing her to return to Guatemala to visit them. "I have a good life here," she says. "This is a good country. This is my home."

Having just graduated high school, and speaking only Creole and French, Porez Luxama came

Betsy Ashton's portrait of Haitian immigrant Porez Luxama.



here with his mother and siblings following a coup d'état in their native Haiti. He now teaches math and science in a New York junior high school and runs the Life of Hope Center in Brooklyn, which helps new immigrants learn language, literacy, job and leadership skills.

The 18 portraits (which Diego Salazar, himself an immigrant from a poor family in Bogotà, Colombia, and one of Ashton's subjects, has been framing) will be on exhibition at Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, New York, from Jan. 19 through Feb. 16, 2019. Other churches and secular venues have expressed interest in the series.

"I want people who see these portraits to empathize with the sitters and to appreciate how hard they work and how grateful they are," Ashton said. "I believe that viewers will discover kindred spirits' who are, in many ways, as 'American' as they are." ■