



GEOFFREY, OIL SIZE 48"X60"

# A PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Interview By Andrea Golts



[Little more than a year ago, **Leif Ilvedson** made a dramatic career change that was inspired by a stranger he met at a New York café. The stranger was artist Geoffrey Holder; after several visits, Leif felt a drive to paint a large-scale portrait and Geoffrey would be his first subject. According to Leif, he went to an art-supply store and told the

clerk that he hadn't really painted with oils since age 12 and explained his vision. After purchasing \$500 worth of supplies, he began to work on the portrait [shown above] that would become the first in a series of portraits and ultimately cause Leif to trade in an engineering career for what can only be described as kismet. A rare natural talent, one would never guess that Leif had begun this pursuit in earnest so recently in his life—and without formal training. I visited Leif at his studio in Mosier to get a preview of the work he will be showing at Solo gallery this month, and to learn more about this emerging young artist...]

**Rediviva:** The subjects of your portraits share a singular quality in the piercing depiction of their eyes. It's almost an uncomfortable sensation to hold a gaze for long with any one of these paintings. Are the eyes the criteria for your choice of subject, or does this emotional aspect develop through your own technique?

**LI:** The eyes are a big part of this body of work. The subjects are looking directly at you just as we do with people we know. But with friends, we don't hold that gaze for very long. If we did, our buddy would say "Uh...are the Blazers playing today?" With family, it's the same way. With your significant other, that gaze can be held for a while. Perhaps that is why it's difficult to hold a gaze. It immediately puts you on that intimate level, which can be uncomfortable when you find yourself there so quickly. Zero to intimate in sixty seconds. If the subject was looking away, we could look at them forever. It's like sitting at a coffee shop and looking at someone who's unaware of your gaze. By painting subjects who are looking directly at you, I take away the ability to look at a stranger. You've never met them, and looking at them immediately starts the interaction between the two of you, creating some kind of mutual baseline understanding of each other. Over time, this relationship, which physically is presented two dimensionally, amazingly continues growing. Before you know it, you have an old friend you can eat with, read with, relax with, and even talk to as well as hear what they have to say. I didn't know this could happen until I experienced it myself.

**R: So, what qualities did the subjects of your portraits exude that compelled you to recreate their image?**

**LI:** I chose the subjects in this series because of that soul connection, and my understanding of that power after being with my painting of Geoffrey [Holder] for a while. But, it's not just the eyes alone. The baseline facial expression of these pieces is just as an important part of this soul connection because it allows you to draw out an emotion from the subject, generally based on your current mood and past life experiences.

Only with a few of my subjects have I had some form of a personal relationship. In those pieces, especially with Geoffrey, I wasn't just painting, I really was painting a soul. I think that had a significant emotional development as it progressed, and I feel that's why it continues to have so much emotion. The painting of the Caucasian elderly man was from a photo that caught my attention because he held so much character. In the photo he was looking away, but I wanted a chance to make him feel more alive, so I redirected his eyes to give us that chance to talk with each other. That would be an example of the eyes not being criteria for my choice of subject, but rather, it was my interpretation of their soul that captured me.

**R: Given that this is a relatively new endeavor for you, have you sold any of your work yet?**

**LI:** I haven't sold any work other than a couple of commissioned pieces that I'm working on.

**R: Regarding portraits, any ideas of who or what you would like to paint next?**

**LI:** Oh yes...I'm quite interested in doing a bullfighting series. It's going to be big, beautiful and rich. I already have the gallery picked out where I will have the show...they don't know about it yet, and in fact don't even show oils. They'll make an exception. Their space is perfect.



**R: I like your confidence. What tangible thing could you not live without?**

**LI:** A peaceful place to live, that I can call my own.

**R: What other art-forms inspire you? (They don't all have to be high-brow...if graffiti or hair-metal inspires you, I want to know that, too!)**

**LI:** Something that makes me notice that I'm noticing. Theo Jansen. Music—all kinds of house (progressive, jackin', deep), trance...jazz. Put nice weather, a good night's sleep, coffee, and thump some house on a high quality sound system and I'm ready to take over the world. Jelly fish inspire me. I was at a museum, and they had a display—a cylindrical column, in the center of a dark room, and some kind of beautiful music playing, and all you could see

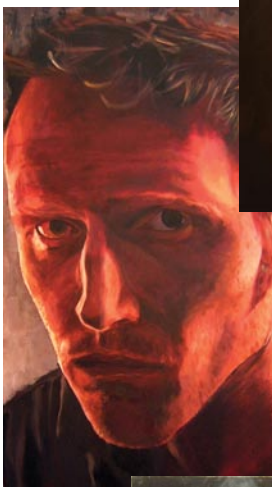
were the jelly fish. And they were lit from above. I will never forget how well they had composed peace and beauty with that display. Someday I want to replicate something similar to it in my own home. You'll later see the influence of jelly fish in a sculpture [his own work.]

**R: What do you do when you're feeling a block—creatively?**

**LI:** Usually when I'm not feeling creative, that means I'm tired. So I take a nap (which happens on a daily basis)...or wait until the next morning. I'm on top of the world in the morning, when the whole day is in front of me, full of productive opportunity. Other prime times for creativity are at night with a good beer like Dogfish Head's Raison D'Être and tunes bumpin'.

**R: Tell me something about you that will shock (or maybe just surprise) me.**

**LI:** [laughs] I have five toes on my left foot. I have jungle fever. I want to be a ninja.





DRIPPY, OIL, SIZE 58"X96"

**R: Your most recent painting employs a method unlike anything that you've attempted yet—and honestly unlike anything I've ever seen. What was your technique for this piece? [shown on page 21]**

LI: Drippy drippy drippy. Basically, I first laid down a very dark ground layer. Then I made an even darker color and painted in some of the major shadows of his face, and that was mainly to help me be aware of where I was on the painting when I started drowning it in paint. Then, I mixed my paint, different colors at different times, with mediums and made it very runny. I would then run the brush across the canvas and would press harder to get more paint to come out of the brush in strategic places...so that the runny paint would run into the places suited for that color. I also added very thick impasto style paint to different parts of the canvas to help guide the running paint as well as give more texture to the image.

**R: It's incredibly unique and yet the eyes—or the very lack of them—are once again the most captivating aspect of the image. How about finishing this sentence for me: "If I couldn't be an artist, I would..."**

LI: I wear a lot of hats, so I'd probably just not have that hat to wear. But if you said, "If in a surprise attack, your hands were

eaten by an upset group of western blue birds..." then I might say, "That would suck" and "What the hell was that all about?" So...I would probably use my creativity in other ways—but that would still be art. Ok, if I couldn't be an artist, that's like saying I couldn't be creative. If I couldn't be creative, which is using my imagination, I would be brain dead: "Take me now God!!!"

**R: Not likely to happen to you any time soon! What is your most recent discovery?**

LI: That you can decide how your life is going to be... "Life is what you make it" is no joke.

**R: So then what can we look forward to seeing from you in the future?**

Well, I think that painting, creating 2D images, is only one of the sardines in the tin. However, as far as that sardine goes, I plan on painting bigger and bigger works. Another sardine I hope to pull out soon, is sculptures: kinetic, dynamic, intelligent, interactive sculptures. I want to integrate technology with art. These pieces will be fascinating to look at just as they are, but are also fascinating to play with. r

**I think that we can expect big things from this guy. Don't miss his opening night at Solo gallery [512 Cascade, Hood River] on Friday March 7th at 5pm. [www.leifilvedson.com](http://www.leifilvedson.com).**

## I asked Leif for his "Top 10": [a simple list of things he enjoys in life.]

- My brother
- The smell of earth getting hit with rain after a dry spell
- Lightning storms
- Swimming underwater in crystal clear warm water
- Bacon
- Campfires
- Snow
- Good lighting & quality sound
- Hummingbirds
- Chance