

into the light

VERMONT PAINTER HONOURS VICTIMS OF COLUMBINE MASSACRE
AND CONTINUES HER UNIQUE PORTRAITURE IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

“ART IS A WOUND TURNED INTO LIGHT,” EARLY 19TH-CENTURY FRENCH PAINTER GEORGES BRAQUE ONCE MUSED. The day the news broke of the horrific 1999 Columbine High School massacre, Fate planted this very idea in the mind of US Virgin Islands pastel painter Livy Hitchcock. A Vermont native, Hitchcock has called St John home since 2004.

Her true gift is capturing the *je ne sais quois* of her portraiture subjects—the intangible essence of human life that, when properly rendered, can make the difference between a mediocre portrayal and a portrait that stops you in your tracks, drawing you deep into the subject’s eyes.

The day after 12 students and one teacher were killed by two Columbine students in the infamous Colorado school shooting spree, the tragedy weighed on Livy’s mind as she worked on a portrait. Like many people across the United States did on that day, the artist wondered how she might help the victims’ grieving families. Suddenly, it dawned on her: she’d use her gift to help turn the families’ wounds into light.

Hitchcock began by reaching out to the families of the 12 students. The first to respond to her offer was Misty Bernall, whose daughter Cassie was among the Columbine victims. Misty asked Hitchcock if she could include two portraits in a single image—one of Cassie as a young child, and one of the teenager at the age when she died. And so the artist embarked on a 15-year-long project that would challenge her both emotionally and professionally. She delivered the 11th of 12 portraits in 2013, and is still trying to make contact with the family of the 12th victim.

“The Columbine portraits are like a story of each child’s life,” says Hitchcock. “It made me a better artist because I had to create a painting that was about each child. There was no single photo to work from. I had to put them all together and make a story.”



LEFT V
TOP C
ABOVE C

The portrait of victim Corey DePooter depicts him in the foreground as a two-year-old, fishing pole in hand, the focus evident on his face as he patiently waits for that telltale tug on his line. In the background, teenage Corey smiles brightly as he displays a trout he’d reeled in. The painting of victim Rachel Scott shows her as a sweet, apple-cheeked toddler in a charming ruffled dress sitting next to her relaxed and happy teenage self.





THOUGH HITCHCOCK COUNTS THE COLUMBINE PORTRAITS AS ONE OF THE PROJECTS THAT BRINGS HER THE MOST PRIDE, HER DECADES-LONG CAREER HAS SEEN OTHER TRIUMPHS AS WELL



TOP C
ABOVE C
RIGHT V

Though Hitchcock counts the Columbine portraits as one of the projects that bring her the most pride, her decades-long career has seen other triumphs as well. She's always been drawn to the idea of painting people. This desire led her to major in fashion illustration at Lasell College in Massachusetts, where at age 18, she took her first-ever art class—figure drawing. She also took an oil painting class during her time at Lasell, but didn't fare so well because of what could be chalked up as creative differences.

"The teacher wanted us to do abstract, but that's not me," Hitchcock recalls. "I ended up with a C in the class. I was like, oh well, I'm just going to paint and be an artist."

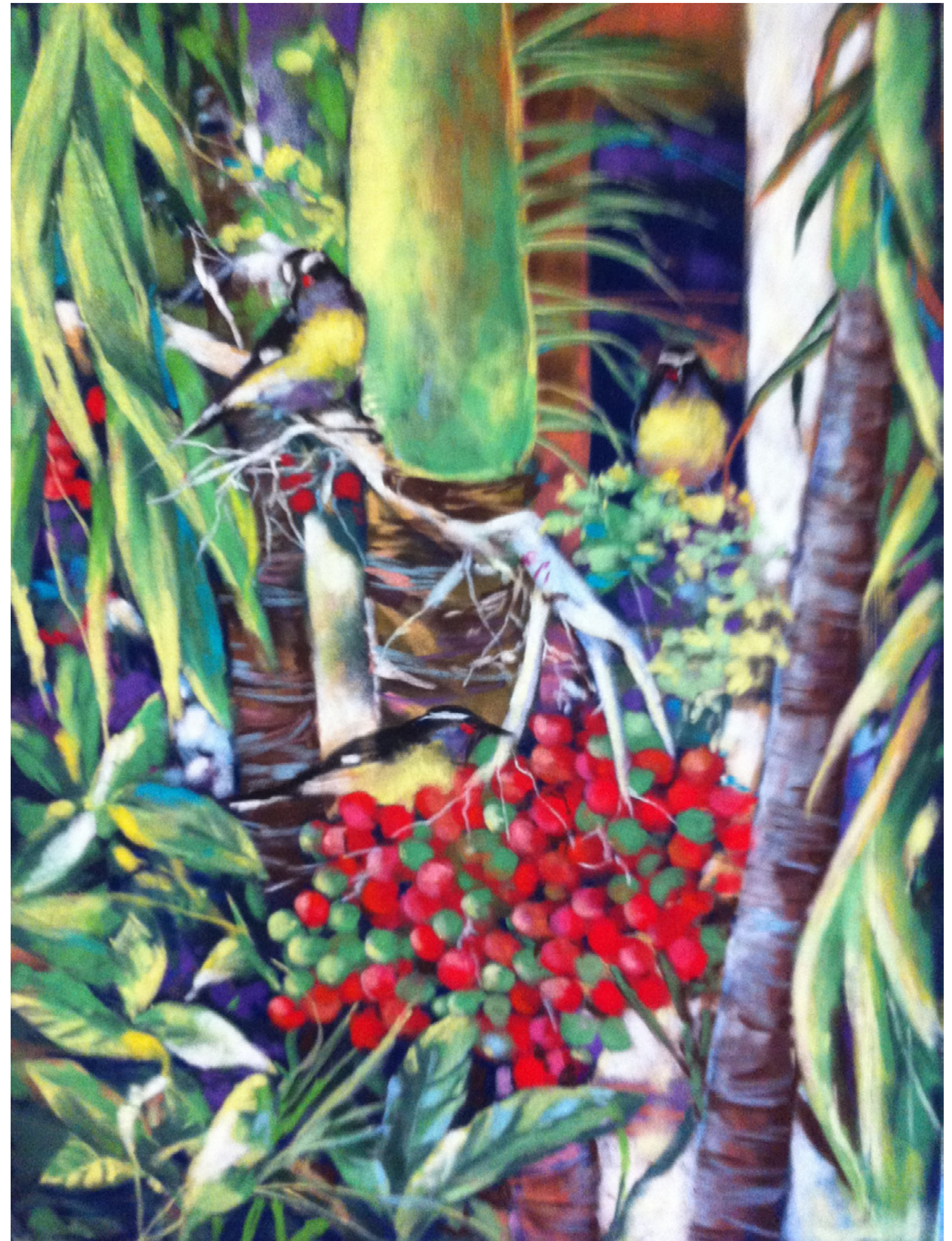
Following her graduation, she continued to make art a part of her life as she worked in a dentist's office and then spent time in the Philippines during a stint in the Peace Corps with her husband, Tom. The couple then returned to Vermont in the early 1970s, where they worked as dorm parents at two different Burlington-area boarding schools. It was at the boarding schools that Hitchcock finally began earning money for her talent.

"I started doing sketches for the kids for free, and then I went on to charge \$10," she recalls. "Then I started doing portraits, charging \$60 per person. Little by little, more and more people came to me for portraits."

Hitchcock continued to hone her craft over the next three decades; she joined the local art association, exhibited her work, and eventually opened her own studio in Essex, Vermont. The largely self-taught painter also took students under her wing, teaching private lessons in drawing, watercolour, and pastel. As her career blossomed in the states, however, Hitchcock couldn't ignore the pull of the Caribbean.

"My parents built a home on St Croix in 1972, and we always went there for vacation," says Hitchcock. "When they decided to sell, I said, you can't leave the Caribbean! I love the colours, I love the water. The most fun I had painting was capturing the beauty of the Caribbean."

Livy and Tom finally decided to make the move to St John in 2004 with plans to buy an established art gallery. When their first offer fell through, Hitchcock impulsively cold-called the owner of another gallery called Bajo el Sol, located in the popular island shopping centre, Mongoose Junction—despite the fact that the gallery wasn't for sale.





"I called Aimee Trayser at home and just explained who I was, telling her I just wanted to network with her because we were both artists," says Hitchcock. "There's this silence on the line, and she says, 'I can't believe you just called me because I decided yesterday—and nobody even knows yet—but I've decided to sell my gallery.' "

After returning to Vermont to sell their home and wrap up stateside life, Tom and Livy officially became St John residents and owners of the Bajo el Sol gallery. Aimee Trayser, a collage artist and the gallery's former owner, continues to be Bajo's best seller.

More than a decade of life in the Virgin Islands has treated Hitchcock well. Almost immediately upon arriving on St John, she began teaching painting with pastels to guests at the posh Caneel Bay Resort; she became the official artist in residence there in 2010. Hitchcock's art career has remained strong, and she sees inspiration around her every day.

"I just love painting the water, and I love the colours," she says. "I learned how to paint en plein air here while teaching others. Any time of day, you can be inspired by nature and the water. There's so much that's inspiring."

The artist has such a strong fondness for the island's natural beauty, in fact, that she brought that beauty into the St John home she and her husband built. She painted a large portion of the home's concrete floor as one sweeping ocean scene using a concrete stain. Stop and explore for a while and you'll see starfish, reef fish both large and small, a sizable turtle, and coral gardens—all in an homage to the island she calls home.

Hitchcock likens the concrete stain to working with watercolors, her preferred medium for landscapes for 25 years. Recently, however, her love of using pastels for portraits eventually crossed over to her landscapes too. She now works almost exclusively in pastels, preferring their versatile, user-friendly quality.

Despite the pure magnetism that St John visitors—and Hitchcock herself—feel to the island's natural beauty, Hitchcock remains most inspired by what initially drew her into art as a career—people.



LEFT ABOVE C

LEFT BELOW C

ABOVE V

"I love West Indian skin," Hitchcock says. "There is nothing more beautiful than black skin. It's just the colours—the browns, there's red in there, there's blue. It's just velvety."

Black, white, and every colour in between, Hitchcock's portraits combine an almost photo-realistic presentation with a feeling of warmth that's hard to describe. When you've stopped to stare at a Livy Hitchcock portrait because the subject so captivated you—that's when the painting reveals its magic in the connection the artist makes with her subjects. M

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