



PORTRAITS OF
A SICILIAN FAMILY

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For the past decade, Thomas MacPherson has been working on a series of paintings and installations chronicling the Sicilian side of his family, the Barones and the Guginos (who became O'Geens in the new country). Both families came to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The Guginos' arrival is commemorated in *Italian Gothic* (2008), where MacPherson represents his Sicilian great-grandparents, dressed in their best clothes, carefully delineated by the artist. The principal focus of MacPherson's art is, however, on the Barones, his mother's family. It was the Barones who gave him his Sicilian identity, when he, his mother, and sister went to live with his grandmother, Carrie Barone, after his parents divorced. Carrie Barone became a Gugino when she married Francesco Gugino on November 24, 1912, in Le Roy, New York. The two families arranged the marriage, and Carrie saw her groom only once or twice before they married. She summed up the marriage, when asked if it was happy, with the words "He was my husband! I have nothing more to say."

The Barone memory portraits combine images adapted from photographs of MacPherson's relatives and imagery culled from his knowledge of Italian Renaissance art. MacPherson works with egg tempera, which he learned to use in New York City from the painter Ophrah Shemesh. Since studying with Shemesh, MacPherson has continued developing his technique through experimentation and the study of Renaissance descriptions of egg tempera uses found in treatises such as Cennino Cennini's *The Craftsman's Handbook (Il libro dell'arte)*. Although grounded in Renaissance technique, MacPherson's paintings have an aesthetic sensibility that situates them chronologically in the 1950s and 1960s, the decades he recreates in the series developed under the umbrella title "The Italian-American Family Album." This exhibition presents samples from the series, while simultaneously demonstrating the development of MacPherson's egg-tempera technique, one that expresses his identity as an Italian American with roots in Sicily.

In the Barone household, presided over by "Grandma," life was lived in the United States with the changing values characteristic of immigrant acculturation and assimilation. The Barones remained Sicilian, even as they became Americanized and none more so than Grandma, whose consistent summation of life was the phrase "Whadda ya gonna do?," which became the title of MacPherson's 2006 painting. Grandma's favorite phrase was the foundation for MacPherson's ironic, witty, and celebratory portraits of his Sicilian relatives, who were his role models, moral guides, and inspiration as a child and now as an artist. *Whadda Ya Gonna Do?* commemorates Grandma speaking to us, as she sits enshrined and enthroned with her crucifix, rosary beads, and religious statues, all the attributes and implements with which she ruled her Sicilian-American family.

For MacPherson, the 1950s and 1960s were the years when he experienced Sicilian-American family life at Grandma's house, where the virtuous aunts and rogue uncles would visit to gossip, tell stories of their experiences, and eat Grandma's food. *Easter Conflagration* (2007) encapsulates the series by depicting MacPherson's relatives gathered in their differentiated spheres of control. The men are in the kitchen, drinking and being "bad," as the women, wearing their church veils and surrounded by lilies, look on disapprovingly, embodying the forces of "good."

The Barones and the O'Geens were a diverse family, from *Ace and Frank* (2013), World War II heroes who participated in the liberation of Dachau (Frank O'Geen was one of the soldiers who secured the gates of the concentration camp), to Great Uncle Tony, of *Great Uncle Tony Needs a Nurse* (2008), whose mob activities were ignored by a family in denial, especially by his dotting sister Carrie. Some of the Barones stayed close to home, like Aunt Rose, the subject of *Visions of Great Aunt Rose* (2011),

whose histrionic personality amused and controlled family occasions at her house. Uncle Pete Barone was a great traveler; he joined the Merchant Marine to see the world, and the great world he saw and the stories he told of his travels have been commemorated in *The Adventures of Great Uncle Pete* (2007). *Cosmo Barone in Paradise* (2007) is MacPherson's tribute to the uncle who was simultaneously devoted to his family yet hedonistic in his personal activities, providing a contrast to the Catholicism that shaped the lives of the Barones. In *No, I'm Not Colonel Sanders* (2011), MacPherson's Great Uncle Ross Barone appears nattily dressed, standing next to his turquoise T-bird, an icon of American success and of the era that MacPherson so lovingly chronicles. Sometimes the relatives were acquired through circumstance, as were Ross and Ida, a couple who lived next door to the Barones with their two daughters, and who cared for MacPherson when he was an infant and his mother was ill. Their kindness is commemorated in *The Nuptials of Ross and Ida* (2012).

Throughout MacPherson's series Grandma remains the queen of the works, as she was the queen of the Barones, and it is to her that MacPherson returns as the main motif of his themes. *La Mia Vita* (2010) encapsulates Grandma's divided life, in which she retained her Sicilian identity even as she negotiated her encounters with American culture, which she characterized simultaneously as difficult, yet blessed. "Oh, Dear Lord, I've been through hell but God's been good to me," was how Grandma summarized her life, and it is this divided perception that is the subject of this painting.

Grandma's life was difficult, as is expressed in the painting *Italian Grapes of Wrath* (2009), which depicts the Barones' struggle to survive the Depression. The family farm is represented in this painting just before it was sold. It was in the aftermath of the sale that Grandma bought the house in Le Roy where MacPherson was raised. Grandma prospered despite setbacks, and, as a seamstress for Hickey-Freeman, the Rochester clothing manufacturer, Grandma was able to provide for herself and her family. Grandma loved working for Hickey-Freeman because she felt that she was paid a fair wage for her work and because they gave her a financial security she had not known before in her life. *The Celestial Tilt-O-Whirl* (2009) is how MacPherson imagines Grandma's life in Heaven, where she gets to have all the fun she didn't have on earth.

MacPherson's latest portrait of Grandma, *Sacred Conversation* (2014), encapsulates Grandma's belief in her ability to communicate with the Virgin Mary as easily as she could speak with her brothers. Here Grandma appears as a child enthroned against a backdrop inspired by the Renaissance painter Carlo Crivelli (c. 1435–c.1495). Her hands brush those of her brothers. Her head is tilted, as though she were resting it on the Virgin's shoulder. To Grandma, the Virgin was family. Church and family were the institutions Carrie Barone believed in and that guided her life. Even now, it is her faith and its principles that are the source of MacPherson's images, which are an ongoing record of her life and her legacy.

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SELECTED IMAGES



Great Uncle Tony Needs a Nurse
egg tempera, 2008, 17 x11 inches



Ace and Frank
egg tempera, 2013, 20 x16 inches

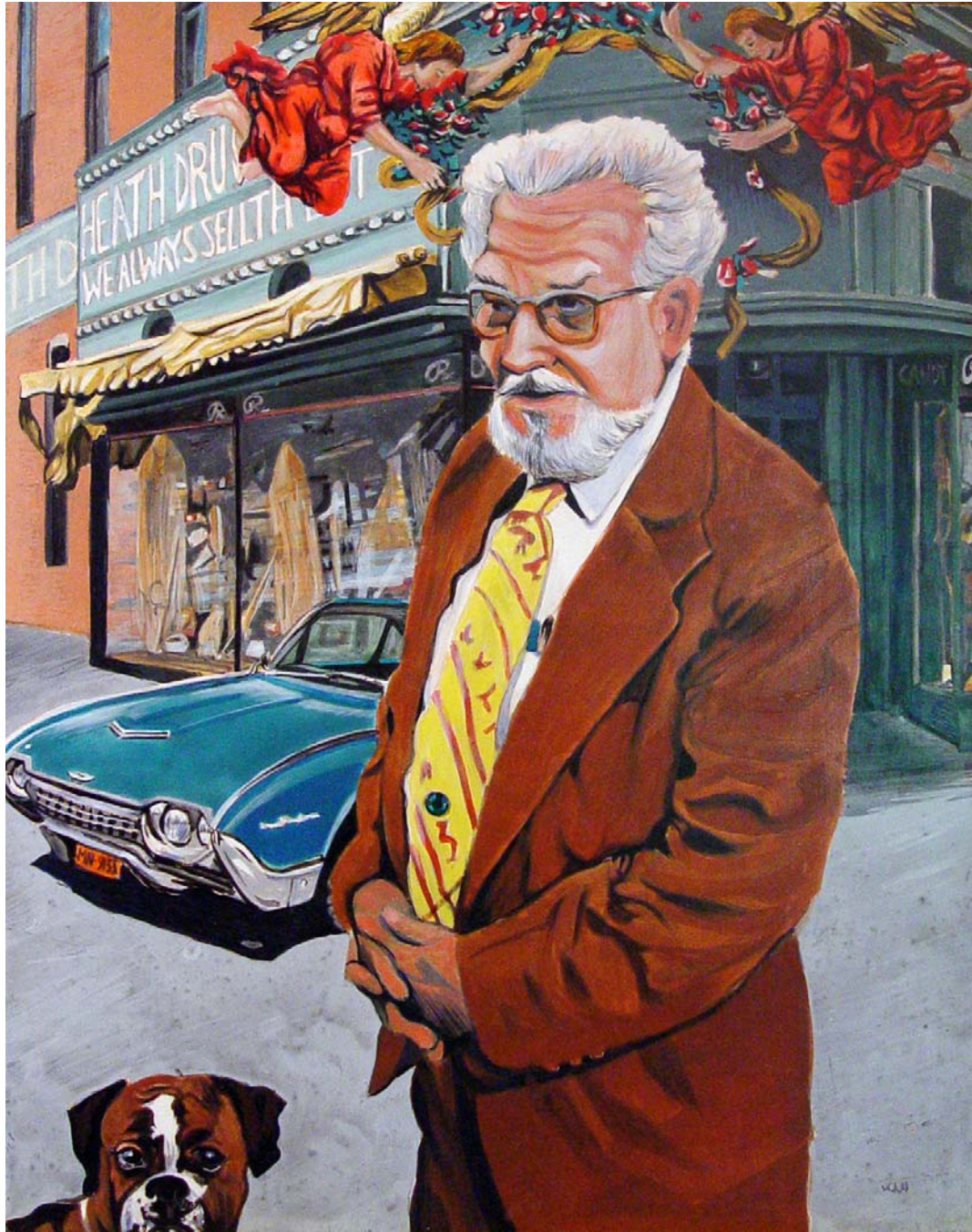


Cosmo Barone in Paradise
egg tempera, 2007, 14 x11 inches



La Mia Vita

egg tempera, 2010, diptych, 36 x 24 inches and 14 x 11 inches



No, I'm Not Colonel Sanders
egg tempera, 2011, 19 ½ x 11 inches



The Nuptials of Ross and Ida
egg tempera, 2012, 24 x16 inches



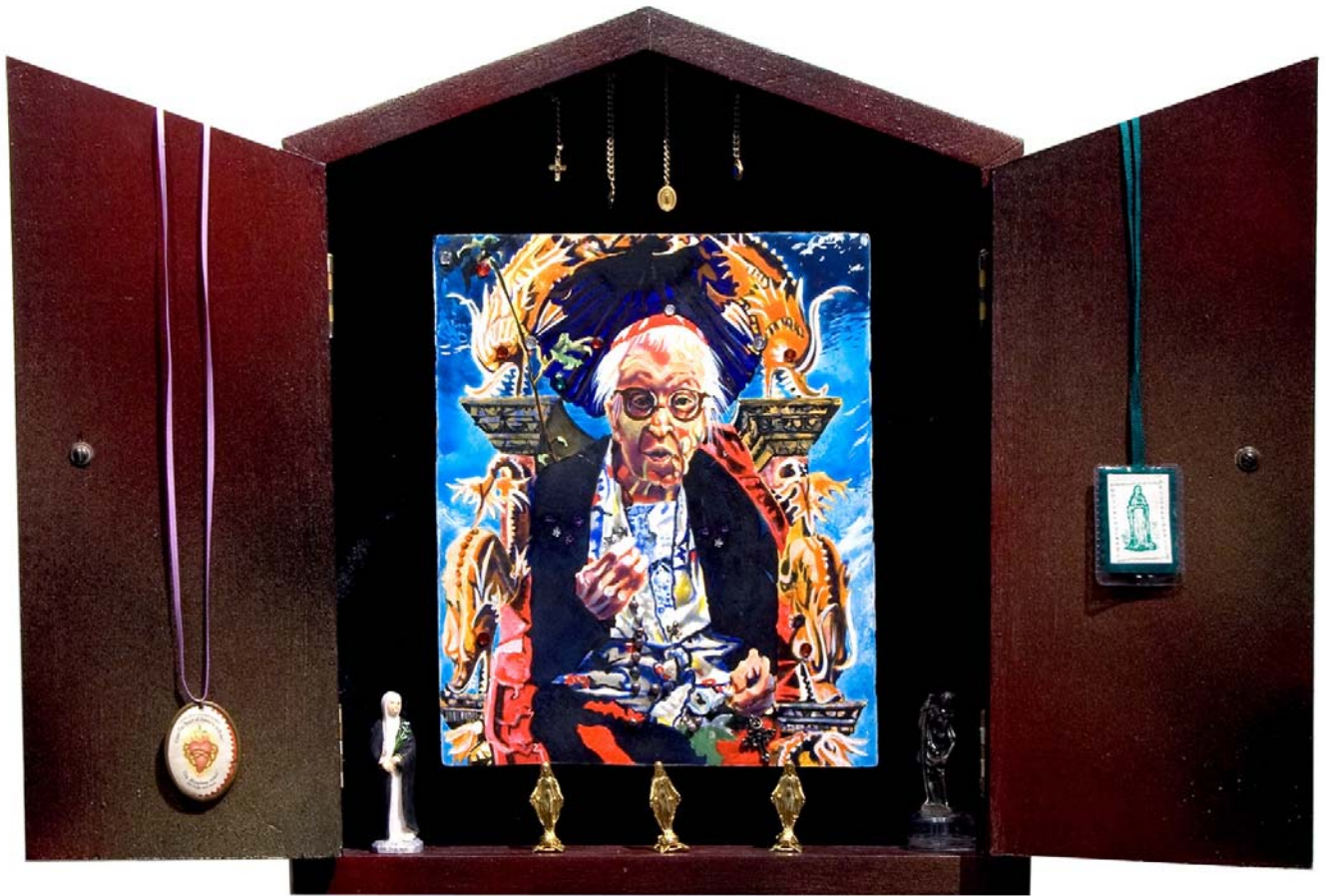
Sin City and the Holy City
egg tempera, 2008, 11 x 9 inches



The Adventures of Great Uncle Pete
egg tempera, 2007, 24 x18 inches



The Sacred Conversation
egg tempera, 2014, 20 x16 inches



Whadda Ya Gonna Do?
egg tempera, pearls, beads, and crucifix, 2006, 12 x 9 inches

EXHIBITED WORKS

Whadda Ya Gonna Do? egg tempera, pearls, beads, and crucifix, 2006, 12 x 9 inches

The Adventures of Great Uncle Pete, egg tempera, 2007, 24 x 18 inches

Cosmo Barone in Paradise, egg tempera, 2007, 14 x 11 inches

Easter Conflagration, egg tempera, 2007, diptych, 12 x 8 inches

Great Uncle Tony Needs a Nurse, egg tempera, 2008, 17 x 11 inches

Italian Gothic, egg tempera, 2008, 11 x 8 inches

Sin City and the Holy City, egg tempera, 2008, 11 x 9 inches

The Celestial Tilt-O-Whirl, egg tempera 2009, 11 x 14 inches

Italian Grapes of Wrath, egg tempera, 2009, 14 x 11 inches

La Mia Vita, egg tempera, 2010, diptych, 36 x 24 inches and 14 x 11 inches

No, I'm Not Colonel Sanders, egg tempera, 2011, 19 ½ x 11 inches

Visions of Great Aunt Rose, egg tempera, 2011, 18 x 25 inches

The Nuptials of Ross and Ida, egg tempera, 2012, 24 x 16 inches

Ace and Frank, egg tempera, 2013, 20 x 16 inches

The Sacred Conversation, egg tempera, 2014, 20 x 16 inches

ARTIST STATEMENT

Portraits of a Sicilian Family is an exhibition of egg-tempera portraits that explore my Sicilian-American identity by combining personal history and art history; the settings from my past are situated in Renaissance constructs. It is a celebration of the people who persevered through incredible hardship and prejudice, paving the way for the next generation to succeed as they never thought possible. Since egg tempera is intimately associated with Italy, the medium allows me to depict my family in a look that reads as "Italian." The paintings explore issues of cultural and ethnic identity, discrimination, social injustice, power, and conflict, often through ironic juxtapositions of past and present.



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