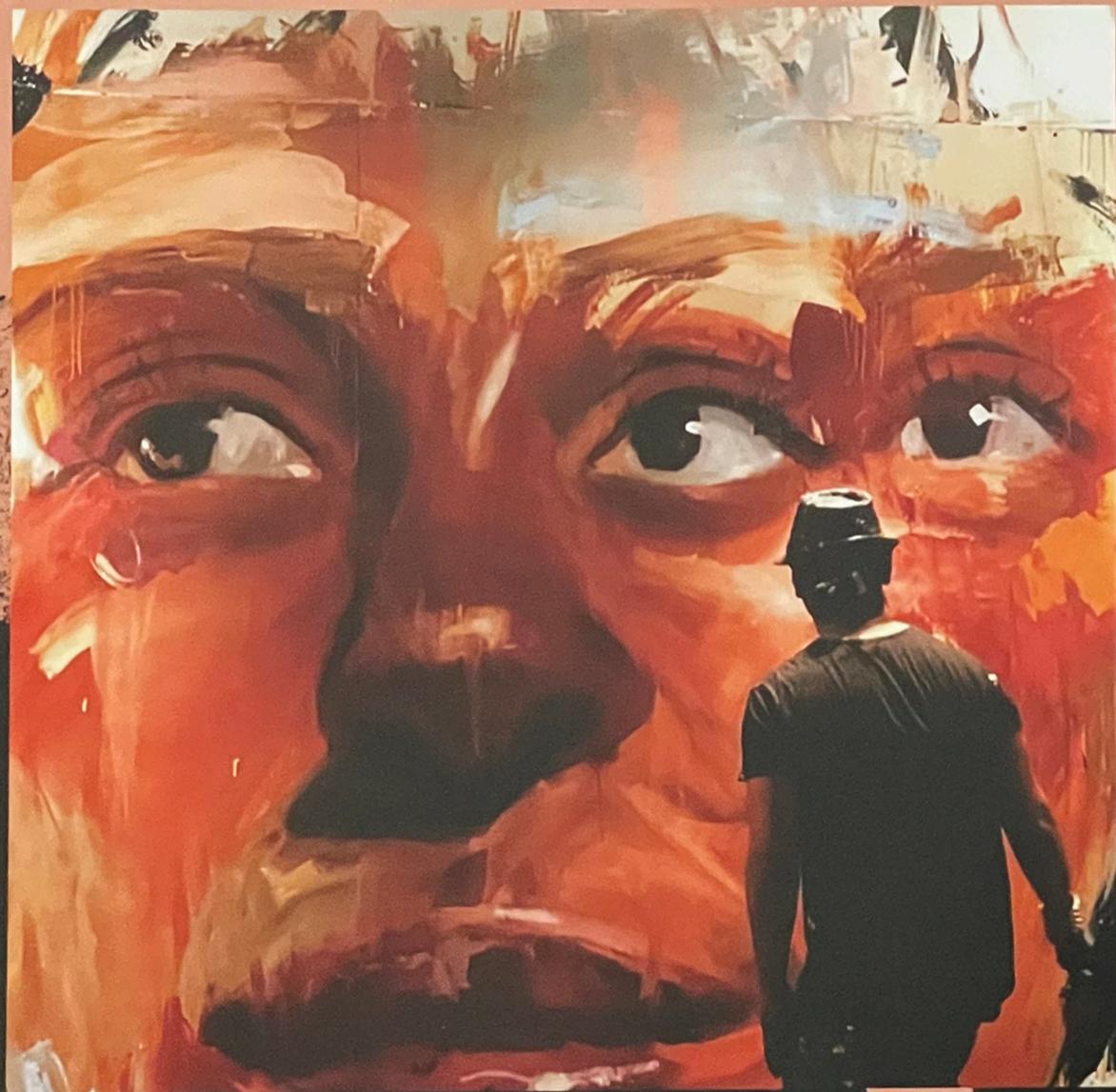


ROBERT VARGAS

PURSUIT OF PORTRAITS



Words by
Lisa Wayne

Los Angeles native and contemporary artist known for his vibrant mixed-media murals embellishing buildings throughout historic DTLA neighborhoods, Robert Vargas paints hundreds of portraits a year and is making a tremendous impact in his community and around the world. The artist is currently putting the finishing touches on another highly recognizable landmark—a 5,500 square meter mural painted on the side of a 14-story apartment building and filling our sight-line with a message of hope.

Seeking to bring together communities one-by-one, Vargas is known for his freehand painting style with a variety of brushes, a technique akin to that of Michelangelo as he painted the Sistine Chapel. From scaffolding and ropes to pulleys, he confronts the dizzying heights of his canvases to bring a little more humanity to the world. The mural features angels rising above the cityscape, one of which is Vargas's mother, painted in all of her beauty alongside another Angel—a portrait of a homeless woman he sees regularly in the area. Empowering and uplifting others with his art, Vargas celebrates the diversity of Los Angeles.

BASIC: You spend time on Skid Row sketching and painting the people there, so many of whom have been forgotten by society. How are you received by them and what is that interchange like?

Vargas: In DTLA you don't have to go very far to encounter homelessness. Through my work with them I give acknowledgment and hope through my creative process. And with the finished art piece, I hope to bring more awareness to the greater L.A. area about what is happening down here. I had a solo show a couple of years ago featuring just the portraits I have created of the homeless. It was a means of also sharing the fact that they too, are a part of the community here.

BASIC: Los Angeles is undergoing a cultural Renaissance. Where does street art fit in?

Vargas: L.A., unlike any other city, has the perfect climate and space to be able to create work that lives outside the galleries. I believe that an artist can shape the way a city's history is written, and that is what I intend to do.

BASIC: Let's talk about the wall at Pershing Square. What techniques are you using to accomplish the largest mural in history painted by a lone artist?

Vargas: The title of the mural is "Angelus". It is painted freehand by brush only and without the aid of grids or projections. I designed the mural over the course of four years prior to painting it. It is based on the way the sunlight and shadows hit the wall one day of the year. There is a whole sub narrative that happens there. Ultimately, it is a mural of inclusivity and a celebration of L.A.'s cultural diversity.

BASIC: You have prepared an exciting new work for the Huntington Museum, which is being shown on June 18. Tell us about your interpretation of the classical favorite, Blue Boy.

Vargas: This will be a groundbreaking show for the museum. I was asked to create my rendition of the famed Thomas Gainsborough painting as a means of bridging classical portraiture with my more contemporary style. My version will hang there for my show on the 18th. I will be the featured artist painting live that evening and turning the Huntington into my studio for the night!

BASIC: For your passion project, Portraits of The World, how did you go about finding the hundreds of subjects to paint around the globe?

Vargas: I create about 800 portraits a year. These people are all selected intuitively based on my rhythm while creating work live. It's also a means of promoting humanity through my creative process and staying present. It's been amazing to see the connections made throughout the world regardless of language barriers.

BASIC: Up next, an important show in Sweden and New York City. Look out!

Vargas: I will be having my first solo exhibition in Sweden this July at Vida Museum. I will be showing new studio work along with several of my Portraits of Sweden series that I created last year during my tour there. I am also involved in a great collaboration with NBC Entertainment, reimagining the logo to be featured in their Up-Fronts 2019 event in NY. The actual 15-foot mural will go onto 30 Rockefeller to be on view.

Midnight or Midday? Midnight Muscle Car or Classic Car? I drive a C3 Stingray Corvette so, both? Skateboard or Surfboard? Skateboard Club or Stadium? Stadium Red-Eye or Morning Flight? Red-eye and hit the ground running! Homecooked or Restaurant? Depends on the company... Acrylic or Oil? Oil Nikes or Adidas? Vans baby! Rock 'n' Roll or R&B? Rock 'n' Roll all night!