

12 HANDSOME SAM



VALENTINE FOR MY FATHER

VALENTINE FOR MY FATHER

In the 1990s, I became fascinated with Marc Chagall's work and was obsessed with learning to separate colour and line. In other words, there is one composition in colour and another in line. This is a good example of working with that separation.

My father's life was that of an immigrant child coming into Chicago in the early twentieth century. He had emigrated from a small *shtetl* near Kiev, Ukraine. He was the youngest in a family of eight children and moved to what was considered a rough Chicago neighbourhood.

On the left of the painting is my father as a child; perhaps he looked like one of the kids Lewis Hine photographed at about the same time, kids who had to grow up too fast. My father told me lots of stories about friends of his who used to steal and did lots of other bad things—but, of course, in his stories, he didn't. He could have gone either way, but he had a strict father and a strong family. The red area shows my father at various times in his life—always working with fish, his wedding, how he looked as he eventually aged. The blue area is my father as a basketball star; he was a famous basketball player when he went to high school and was remembered for a long time after. My sister owns this painting now—it's one I'm proud of.

OIL ON CANVAS, 60" X 44", 1999, COLLECTION OF SONDRÁ SHAPIRO
AND DR. MARCEY SHAPIRO.



If I were to paint a portrait of my father, Sam Serota, I would start with a dark underpainting to show the very dark parts of him. I would use black paint for all the parts we could not see (and that we never would) and blue for the Jewish parts that became more and more pronounced as he got older. The dark red parts would represent all the hurt he inflicted on his family, all the violence, all the heartbreak.

After painting these dark colours, I would paint the background before I continued on the main figure. That background would illustrate his arriving in the United States at age four, from the Ukraine. There would be images from the early Jewish neighbourhoods in Chicago: the pushcarts on the streets and an ever-present fish store.

Then I would begin to paint his body: a strong, beautiful, very masculine body, one that was good at sports. A handsome, dark-haired, not very tall man, who still somehow managed to be a wonderful basketball player. I would paint his skin, perhaps starting on his hands: skin that was a creamy, vulnerable colour, perhaps one of the reasons for his belligerent stance. His body never had any extra fat on it. He was neat and trim, even into his old age. He kept his hands meticulously clean to belie the fact of his life's work: the cleaning, cutting, and scraping of fish.

For his face, I would still use only dark, transparent colours. I would add soft colours for his cheeks, his thin mouth somewhat redder than the rest of his face, which was clean-shaven. He had small laugh lines, with their implicit sense of humour. For his hair, I would use burnt umber, a transparent, very dark, brown colour. His eyes were dark brown, intelligent eyes that really could see a fish, that understood what to buy if it was fresh, and how to prepare it; but eyes which were also somehow blocked, blunted.

HANDSOME SAM



With Dad in front of a small shack we once rented in South Haven, Michigan. I was about four years old.

What should I dress his beautiful body in? The clothes he wore to cut and scrape the fish? Or the suits, immaculate white shirts and ties in which he dressed up for weddings or the synagogue? Perhaps I'll start instead with the sleeveless undershirts that showed off his strong, muscular arms that could strike out and hurt so quickly.

If I were to paint such a portrait, could I paint those arms to show the other side of him? Could I reveal all his dimensions? Could I show in the painting how he laughed a lot? How he hated people of other races, especially blacks? Could I, with only a few hairs on the end of a stick and this thick coloured stuff called paint, reveal how thoroughly he terrorized three small children and his young, beautiful wife?

That is what I would want to show in my painting, how beautiful and terrible he was at the same time. How love and hate resided simultaneously in the same arms; how love can hurt us or lift us up. He sometimes carried me into the house when I fell asleep in the car. How strong and tender those arms felt then. I would also paint those arms.

REMEMBERING SAM

Can I see my father with clear, fresh eyes and tell about it? When I think of my father, I see a small boy who grew up in a tough neighbourhood. He was one of those kids who photographer Lewis Hine might have taken pictures of: a boy who played ball all through school and was a star on the Marshall High basketball team; a kid who lost his mother when he was thirteen years old. Soon after, when his father wanted to marry again, he left the house rather than live with this new woman.

Sam Serota was a very handsome guy, with a devilish quality and lots of lifelong friends. But he kept his wife and children in constant fear. He would hit out like a knife, like a black snake, and ask questions later. This was a man who left school and went to work in the wholesale fish market in Chicago because his family had always been in the fish business. He became a filleter, one of the best in the market. He was always very good with his hands. He had lightning reflexes, and we were terrified of them.

In my mind's eye, I can still see him coming towards me on the street, walking lightly and elegantly with an athlete's loose, graceful, loping walk. His dark brown hair came to a widow's peak, receding as he aged, but he never became bald. His face was oval, his lower lip