

N. P. Viola's Newspaper Girls

Ricco/Maresca is pleased to present an exhibition featuring the vibrant works on paper left behind by the previously unknown artist Nelson Patrick Viola. Created in 14 x 17-inch spiral sketchbooks—often signed and dated between the early and mid-1960s—Viola's oeuvre consists entirely of individual portraits of women, rendered with bold lines, intense color blocks, and a meticulous hand. The portraits were drawn in colored pencil and graphite, their pigments laid thick and smooth, creating a waxy sheen. Each work is visually striking: hair feathered with shadow, eyes outlined by geometric lashes, smiles rendered with pearly, precisely drawn teeth. The women stare directly at the viewer, composed and fully situated within their environments—still, sculptural, and utterly composed.

Though the portraits share a common language, each is unique in its individuality. The features are soft and rounded, almost mousy, lending the figures an approachable quality while also sealing them hermetically into their surfaces. Viola's sinuous lines and flat, sculptural shapes elevate the mundane source material—newspaper headshots—into iconic, highly stylized images. According to notes passed down from one custodian of the work to the next, Viola scoured local newspapers for photographs of women to use as his subjects. These images were not copied verbatim but transformed through a process that appears both devotional and deeply imaginative.

Viewing Viola's oeuvre en masse is like hearing a chorus: the works "speak" in unison, yet each carries a distinct voice. They are infused with a fascination for femininity, youth, and the presentation of self, quietly reflecting the visual culture of the 1960s—a time when Pop Art, advertising, and print media all converged to shape new ways of seeing. While Pop Art rejected academic traditions by embracing mass culture, Viola's portraits operate in parallel, pulling from vernacular sources to create something intensely personal and outside the formal art world.

The contrast between the bold expressiveness of Viola's drawings and the obscurity of his life reveals the private world of an image collector working outside of public recognition. The son of two Italian immigrants, Viola was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in November 1910. He spent his early adulthood working construction at New York's Grand Central Terminal before being drafted in 1940 as a Technician Fifth Grade soldier, recognized not for combat but for his specialized construction skills. After surviving World War II, Viola returned to Connecticut, working as a

salesman in an auto shop for the remainder of his life. He married twice, had children with both wives, and lived to the age of 98.

The 1960s—a period of political upheaval and rapidly shifting cultural norms—form the unspoken backdrop of Viola's *Newspaper Girls*. This decade saw the rise of feminist thought, spurred in part by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which urged women to break free of domestic confines and claim space in the public realm. Viola's portraits may unconsciously reflect this transformation, as women became more visible in the media and everyday life. But more than commentary, these portraits are acts of reverence—ordinary women transfigured into icons of modernity and grace.

This exhibition offers a vivid chronicle of mid-20th century America through the eyes of an artist who, without formal training or public platform, created a vivid and enduring body of work. Viola's *Newspaper Girls* are the record of a private obsession and a singular vision, captured in hundreds of intimate, electrifying portraits that demand to be seen—and remembered.