

Francesca Galliani makes portraits: of people, places, dreams and nightmares. Whether they depict a single figure photographed in black and white, or utilize a combination of media and materials to evoke a sense of place, her works pay homage to the fragility, transience, and ever changing nature of identity and memory. The striking surfaces and color variations she achieves by manipulating chemicals in the darkroom—in the case of her photographs—or by layering images and paint in her large scale collages, serve to underscore the precariousness of her subjects.

When Galliani sets out to portray the city of New York, her adopted home and a primary source for her creative production, she focuses not only on the famous, iconic landmarks that we all know—the Flat Iron building, Grand Central Station, the Statue of Liberty. She captures as well the New York that is disappearing, lost through shifting demographics or subsumed by commercial real estate development—former storefronts, hand painted wall murals, old hotels whose glory days are past or whose down-on-their-luck tenants have long since departed. Through her eyes we discover a New York we did not know, but one that is beloved by the people who still haunt its streets. Galliani shows us the hidden crevices of human experience, the dark but evocative corners where the romance and grit of a city in transition pulsates with mystery.

Layered beneath, on top of, and alongside these photographic images are faces, scenes, and graphics pulled from sources that range from commercial advertising and newsprint to art history and literature. The artist unites these disparate images through her expressive use of paint and often her own poetic phrases. The effect is almost cinematic, with scenes flickering in and out of the painted background, begging for and yet defying any sort of cohesive, continuous narrative. Galliani offers us a nostalgic portrait of a city whose myth and reality coincide in unexpected but intriguing ways.

The transitory nature of place provides a backdrop for the more psychologically probing and difficult metamorphosis of personal identity. Galliani focuses her artfully compassionate lens on transgender men and women who live on the margins of traditional categories by which we define society and roles within it. Often gorgeous by any measure of conventional beauty, each portrait has a formal power achieved through pose, lighting, and the artist's masterful experimentation with the photographic printing process. But words or images that float within their portrait settings, like the meaning-laden props in a domestic scene by Vermeer, sometimes hint at the more tragic aspects of life experience: "stop misery," "trash," "fight back," "smash gay oppression." The tension in these works arises from the combination of gendered faces and bodies that seem unambiguous, with emotional expressions that vary from seductive, tender, and introspective to despondent, confrontational, and triumphant.

In her depictions of both people and place, Galliani's portraits exude an emotional longing and an attempt to capture that which is most fleeting—the process of becoming. In that respect, the artist and her subjects evolve together.