



Julia Eisen-Lester's painting "The Married Couple"

## Paintings reflect place during pandemic

By Jackie Lupo

From her house on a quiet street in the Ludlow Park section of Yonkers, artist Julia Eisen-Lester can enjoy the natural beauty of the Hudson River or stroll a few blocks to absorb a vibrant urban streetscape. During the past two years, home and neighborhood have also been creative refuges, as "sheltering in place" directives nudged her work in new directions.

Examples of this remarkable interlude in a long artistic career are on display through May 13 at the Hastings Village Hall Gallery. "In Place" is the title of this exhibit, which opened March 8, featuring large oils on canvas in which people are part of the scene, but are often disconnected from others. Some paintings depict the forgotten homelessness of the pandemic.

Eisen-Lester grew up in the Riverdale-Fieldston area of the Bronx and studied at the Art Students League and The New School. She and her husband, jazz musician Billy Lester, raised three children, who are now adults with children of their own. In addition to creating her own art — mostly oils on canvas, with occasional forays into mixed media — she teaches private students out of her home studio. She guides many of her high-school-age students in developing portfolios of work for their college applications.

Early in March 2020, she suspended indoor lessons, as several of the teens she taught had attended the bar mitzvah of a classmate who was related to one of the early Covid patients in the region.

"We had to wash down every tube of paint and piece of chalk," she recalled, evoking the cleaning frenzy that accompanied the onset of the pandemic. "Then I taught outdoors for a while. It was really difficult. Now, I teach three solid days a week, masked in my studio. The rest of the time I've taken just to paint. Teaching is really an integral part of my art practice. It's a two-way street; I get inspired by the kids and they get inspired by what I'm doing. So that's enjoyable to me."

While she had been accustomed to painting scenes of people enjoying activities together, during the pandemic she saw people who appeared

to be disconnected from life and barely getting by.

Outside a facility for mentally ill people, she painted a bedraggled, gray-haired man, sitting on a bench smoking, his eyes unfocused. "I was standing outside the place, and this man was sitting on the bench. I felt his loneliness and despair. And during the pandemic,

I felt he was so alone."

She painted a man scavenging through a trash can as two rats near him also searched for food. She painted a "box dweller" whose home was a cardboard shipping carton furnished only with a pile of blankets. And she paint-

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## Eisen-Lester

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ed a woman dressed in a headscarf and matching kurta, collecting shells along the shoreline.

She also painted indoor scenes of

mothers, children, and long-married couples. She and her husband were able to form a "pod" with two of their three children who live nearby, and their spouses and children. They FaceTimed with her third daughter, who had relocated with her husband and family to Lake George in the Adirondacks. Her family's support came in

handy when she had to undergo spinal surgery, temporarily limiting some of her wanderings in search of paintable people and places.

She did discover new interests, creating a series of detailed, fanciful portraits of tree bark, gnarled roots, and branches, bringing them to extra liveliness by the use of unexpected colors.

And like other work-at-home folks during the pandemic, Eisen-Lester, who had never cared to follow a recipe, took up baking. Now, she's working on a series of still-life paintings, including portraits of her breads and cakes.

To view "In Place," Hastings Village Hall is open weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.