



SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

Vadim Bora depicts his profile in this self-portrait.



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A woman who chanced into Bora's studio became the subject of this portrait, titled "Summer Day."

# Face value

Artist Bora's latest show enchants with self-portraits

By Arnold Wengrow  
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**ASHEVILLE** — To see ourselves as others see us, the poet Robert Burns wrote, is a gift, but it's not one we necessarily want to receive. It's unsettling to recognize yourself unexpectedly in a store window reflection.

And the dialogue we have with our own face in the mirror must be one of our most fraught conversations. So it's courageous when an artist paints his own portrait. Who else looks so unflinchingly at himself?

This may account for our fascination with self-portraits. We are looking over an artist's shoulder during an intimate exchange, when he confronts his own countenance.

Is this how the painter really sees himself? Or is this how he wants us to see him? Is this the artist's face, or is this his soul?

Vadim Bora, the Russian-born artist who shows his own and others' work in his two gallery spaces on Battery Park Avenue, has loaded his current show with self-portraits. While his bearded face, with its sharp nose and high cheekbones, is instantly recognizable in all of them, these are no mirror images. In one picture, he even imagines himself at age 90.

Bora's portraits are structured of thick swaths and patches of vivid colors — blue, purple, green, gold, crimson, magenta — colors rarely associated with human flesh except undergoing disease or decay. They are tightly cropped to the head, with an occasional suggestion of shoulders and chest. No props identify the sitter's profession. No glimpse of room or landscape locates his place in the world.

The artist glowers, squints, closes his eyes, turns away into shadows. The focus is on the face alone, barely contained by the rectangle. The cropping heightens the intensity of the expression. The rough energy of the brushwork, along with those garish colors, creates an almost aggressive



Ewart Ball/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Russian-born artist Vadim Bora sculpts a work in his downtown studio, adjacent to his gallery. Bora's latest exhibit is of his portrait paintings.

## The exhibit

"Life in Portraits," an exhibition of portrait paintings in oils, pastels, and charcoal and portrait sculptures in terra cotta and bronze, is on view at the Vadim Bora Gallery, One Battery Park Avenue in the Haywood Park Hotel. A second gallery is adjacent to the artist's studio upstairs at 30 1/2 Battery Park Ave. For more information, call 254-7959 or visit the Web site [www.vadimborastudio.com](http://www.vadimborastudio.com).

sive tension. These faces are in your face.

In an interview at one of his galleries, Bora said he does not look in a mirror to create these self-portrayals. Similarly, for the other pictures in the show, he works from memory. He depicts the idea of a face and his response to it, more than the face itself.

He tells a story about a painting called "Summer Day" that exemplifies his approach to all his work,

whether portraiture, landscape, or allegory.

A young woman happened into his studio while she was waiting for someone in the building. The artist doesn't mind visitors watching him work and likes having his studio next to his gallery so people can see what he calls "the kitchen."

Intrigued by his visitor's face, he asked her to pose. "I just asked her while she was hanging around, I make a few strokes," he said. "I started with the person, I don't even know her name, I don't even know who she is. When she left, I finished in my own way."

What struck him, he said, was something unexpected about her face. "Usually when you see the eyes you assume the rest of the picture. I can build the body by the hands. Her face was absolutely built from different things, it was unusual. My eye caught this momentum. The eyes wouldn't belong to the nose, the nose wouldn't belong to the lips, the lips wouldn't belong to the chin."

## From Russia to Asheville

Born in North Ossetia, a republic of the Russian Federation, Bora studied in his native city, Vladikavkaz (one of Asheville's sister cities), and at the St. Petersburg Academy of Art, which dates to Catherine the Great and promotes classical and native styles.

He became acquainted with Asheville through the sister cities program and moved here in 1993. A somewhat exotic figure even in a city accustomed to colorful characters, Bora quickly became a presence. His first studio and gallery, on Biltmore Avenue, gave passers-by as well as art lovers a window into his workshop.

His 1999 sculpture, "Cat Walk," for the Urban Trail's Wall Street site, put his work on permanent public view, followed by "The Wings of Freedom" veterans memorial sculpture at the Asheville VA Medical Center.

Now, despite the Russian accent, Bora says he feels like a native. He participates eagerly in the life of the community, whether it is setting up as a sidewalk portraitist at Bele Chere or donating work for charity auctions.

Nicholas Goncharov, a retired international YMCA executive, is one of Bora's Asheville collectors. What he finds fascinating about the artist is his multiplicity of styles. "His paintings can be lyrical, classical, romantic, or very far-out like Kandinsky or Picasso," he said.

A nephew of famed Russian artist Natalia Goncharova, Goncharov met Bora by chance when he heard the artist speaking Russian sitting outside a Biltmore Avenue café. Among the Bora paintings he owns is an allegory he describes as "whimsical."

"A naked Eve, a voluptuous Eve," he said, "is in the middle of the apple tree, sharing apples with the world, throwing the apples to mankind. Adam's not in the picture. Suddenly he became shy."

Arnold Wengrow writes about the arts for the Citizen-Times. He is a contributing editor of Theatre Design and Technology magazine.