

The Secret to a Good Life

By Jessica Voorsanger



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Jessica Voorsanger
Name of Output:	<i>The Secret to a Good Life</i>
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/4622/
Output Type:	M - Exhibition
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p><i>The Secret to a Good Life</i>, exhibition, Ronald and Rita McAulay Gallery, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 4/09/18 - 03/02/2019</p> <p><i>The Secret to a Good Life</i>, book (Bob and Roberta Smith, Royal Academy of Arts, 2018, ISBN 978-1910350836): includes Voorsanger's works</p>
Co-researchers:	Co-exhibitors: Bob and Roberta Smith and Etta Voorsanger-Brill. Works by the late Deirdre Borlase and her husband Fred Brill were also exhibited.
Key Words:	Female artists, discrimination against women, painting, sculpture, Royal Academy, family, collaboration
Funding:	Royal Academy - approximately £30,000 including exhibition installation, marketing, publication, essay for the exhibition pamphlet, opening event, gallery space and invigilation

Synopsis

The Secret to a Good Life was a collaborative exhibition by Jessica Voorsanger, Bob and Roberta Smith RA and their daughter Etta Voorsanger-Brill. The three artists worked collectively and collaboratively on the exhibition as a whole, as well as contributing individual and collaborative works. The accompanying book, *The Secret to a Good Life* by Bob and Roberta Smith, explores the role of women artists, gender prejudice in the art world, and the benefits of drawing every day. It contains images of the work of all three artists and further disseminates the research.

Bob and Roberta Smith's mother, the artist Deirdre Borlase, regularly exhibited in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. In this project, marking the RA's 250th anniversary, members of Borlase's family explored her story, and that of other – sometimes strained – relationships between women and the Royal Academy over its history. The exhibition included paintings by Borlase from the 1940-80s, and a portrait of her

by her husband, artist Frederick Brill. Voorsanger's contribution was to explore the story of women artists at the Royal Academy through this lens of the artists' own family history.

Three new sculptures were displayed in the exhibition, including 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA', a large-scale collaborative work by Smith and Voorsanger. Kauffman was a founder member of the RA, and the only female Academician for over a hundred years. The sculpture represented Kauffman alongside other female artists. Smith created the sculptural structure, and on this were placed 15 separate painted portraits by Voorsanger, of Kauffmann and other female artists.

This portfolio of supporting contextual information includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It also includes images of Voorsanger's portrait works, installation views of the exhibition and a PDF of the book.

*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA', Bob
and Roberta Smith and Jessica
Voorsanger, Royal Academy, 2018*





Installation View, Secret to a Good Life, Royal Academy. 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA' is in the foreground



Installation View, Secret to a Good Life, Royal Academy. 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA' is to the far right, Bob and Roberta Smith's [book] text panels are in the centre



Installation View, Secret to a Good Life, Royal Academy with 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA' in the foreground

Context

The Secret to a Good Life celebrated the life of the artist Deirdre Borlase. According to Borlase, 'The secret to a good life is to get a good pencil, a 2B or 3B. You don't want an HB, those are for architects!' Borlase graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1946 and had a prolific career. However, she thought her work was more likely to be selected by the Royal Academy if she submitted it without her first name, to avoid revealing her gender. She was accepted more frequently than her husband, Frederick Brill, who was Principal of Chelsea School of Art in the early 1980s and an academic painter. Borlase was the mother of Bob and Roberta Smith (Voorsanger's husband). Borlase passed away in July 2018: she did not see the exhibition realised.

As well as the family focus on Borlase as mother/mother-in-law/grandmother of the three artists, the exhibition also considered women within the RA more widely. Sculptures in the exhibition included 'This is Deirdre Borlase ARCA, 2018' by Bob and Roberta Smith RA and 'This is Mary Moser RA, 2018', a large-scale collaborative sculpture of the Academy's second female member by Smith and Voorsanger's daughter, Etta Voorsanger-Brill. Voorsanger-Brill created a fanzine on Moser, whose pages covered the structure made by Smith. Bob and Roberta Smith's sculpture, 'This is Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA, 2015', previously exhibited in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, was also displayed, along with painted text panels that he created especially for this project.

Jessica Voorsanger's piece was titled 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA'. While the work itself was intended to be a metaphorical-sculptural portrait of Angelica Kauffman, it was also a symbolic and actual portrait of all women artists. The sculpture was topped by a portrait of Kauffman, painted by

Voorsanger, and its body consisted of Voorsanger's 14 portraits of other women artists that she found inspiring.

Voorsanger's rationale in the selection of the portraits was to celebrate not only the mainstream of acknowledged female artists, but also artists who asked uncomfortable questions of their audiences, their subjects, and in their own lives and, in some cases, deaths. For example, Yayoi Kusama's periodic residence in psychiatric care institutions has enhanced audiences' interest in her highly-patterned surfaces, while Ana Mandieta's mysterious death (believed to have been pushed out of a window by her partner, Carl Andre) has added to her fascination. Voorsanger asked, does a female artist only achieve recognition through a non-normative life that creates a 'mystique'? What of the phenomenal work they made? These enquiries return to the initial research question, investigating how and why women artists had to fight for their success and recognition through a predominantly patriarchal establishment.

The project furthered Voorsanger's existing research into feminist and political concerns, with a particular focus on women artists and their historical roles. In previous work Voorsanger has, for instance, explored fan culture, finding that the lack of agency of women (and girls) was reflective of their social position.

The research for this project has also underpinned other work by Voorsanger, including work made in her *Processions* project, celebrating the Suffragettes. The submerging of the female voice has been historically and systematically consistent. It is through activists like Sojourner Truth, Betty Friedan, bell hooks and many others that these voices can be heard.

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

Angelica Kauffman was a founding member of the RA: why has she been so little known over the last 150 years?

To what extent does a female artist still need to pretend to be a man to succeed?

Does a female artist have to be 'other' to receive full recognition?

Research aims:

The underlying agenda of the exhibition was to celebrate women artists who have been overshadowed by history, their family circumstances or gender prejudice.

The aim of Voorsanger's piece was to investigate and draw attention to the particular role of Angelica Kauffman within the Royal Academy and situate her within a history of under-appreciated women artists.

THIS EXHIBITION
IS A COLLABORATION
BETWEEN
JESSICA VOORSANGER
ETTA VOORSANGER-BRILL
FREDRICK BRILL
DEIRDRE BORLASE
AND
BOB AND ROBERTA SMITH

*Secret to a Good Life, title image,
Bob and Roberta Smith, Royal
Academy, 2018*



Installation View, Secret to a Good Life, Royal Academy, 2018



*This is my sculpture
of Deirdre. She taught
me to draw. Start with
the Christmas Pudding
and end with
your whole family
celebrating on
Christmas day*

Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Deirdre Borlase ARCA', Royal Academy 2018

Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Mary Moser RA', Etta Voorsanger-Brill, Royal Academy 2018



Research Methods and Process

The Secret to a Good Life was proposed as a collaborative project that integrated the work of Bob and Roberta Smith, Jessica Voorsanger and Etta Voorsanger-Brill as a 'creative family', with the aim of celebrating Deirdre Borlase, Angelica Kauffman (as the Royal Academy's first Academician), and all women artists.

In the sculpture 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA' Voorsanger and Smith collaborated in a process that was focussed on a specific outcome but that did not prescribe the steps to be taken. The artists knew that they wanted the work to consist of a sculptural structure by Smith and portraits by Voorsanger, however there was (deliberately) little discussion in how the elements would come together. Each artist felt it was important to keep their own creative identity clear whilst creating a work that was an integrated whole.

Voorsanger made the portrait of Kauffman (oil on wood) which is used as the 'head' of Smith's structure, and the 14 portraits of other women artists that make up the body. Kauffman was the only prescribed subject, as a founding member of the Royal Academy and its first female Academician. The other female artists were all selected by Voorsanger because she found them inspiring. She tried to keep her choices relatively mainstream so that visitors to the galleries would recognise the artists, but realised that that is very subjective. In the end, she

selected artists based on her assessment of their impacts on their audiences.

The final selection includes both historical figures (the earliest is Sofonisba Anguissola, 1532-1625) and contemporary living artists. Alice Neel was chosen both because she was an early influence on Voorsanger, sparking her strong interest in portraiture, and because her relationship with her sitters always created extraordinary works. Inspiration for the use of colour and pattern in the portraits came from Yayoi Kusama and Lee Krasner. Voorsanger selected Claude Cahun and Ana Mandieta because of their experiments with performance and costume and their playfulness around gender. Edmonia Lewis was included for her skill as a sculptor, while Sonia Boyce, the first female Royal Academician of colour, is much admired by Voorsanger. Voorsanger wanted her portraits to show the women's strength, creativity, voices and diversity (including diversity in relation to race and normative ideas of gender).

Portraiture has always been an important element in Voorsanger's practice. Making these portraits for the Royal Academy has located them as works in themselves, whereas previously her portraits had functioned as supporting works within other projects. A video of Voorsanger and the other artists talking about the exhibition is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84xe34JqPow>

Research Insights, Dissemination and Recognition

Insights and contribution:

The exhibition provided new insights into how Deirdre Borlase's role as a mother and wife limited her professional opportunities and at times created tension in the household. Voorsanger's paintings of the RA's female founder and other marginalised female artists situated Borlase's struggle as part of a wider issue. By combining family history and the history of the RA, Voorsanger was thus able to explore further the gender prejudice of the art world and to celebrate inspiring women artists.

Dissemination:

There were 250,000 visitors to the exhibition.

Royal Academy website presentation on the research: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/bob-and-roberta-smith-ra-secret-to-a-good-life>

Photographs from the opening: <https://www.shutterstock.com/editorial/news/%27the-secret-of-a-good-life%27-exhibition%2C-london-2018-09-04>

PRESS

The Art Newspaper, 6/9/18: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/blog/bob-and-roberta-smith-s-family-values-and-pencil-power-at-the-royal-academy-of-arts>

The *Guardian's* obituary of D. Borlase (mentioning the show), 30/7/18: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jul/30/deirdre-borlase-obituary>

London Lamp Post, 14/11/18: <https://londonlamppost.com/the-secret-to-a-good-life>

Tincture of museum, 6/9/18: <https://tinctureofmuseum.com>

Research Insights, Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

This research led to Voorsanger's solo exhibition *Artist-in-Residence on The Starship Enterprise* at SCHOOL Gallery, London. This exhibition explored similar issues via portraits of the characters in six different series of the TV show Star Trek, and other large-scale paintings.

The research has also led to Voorsanger being commissioned to produce further portrait-based work including *Ladies That Knit for Peace* at the Drawing Room.

'This is Angelica Kauffman RA' will be shown again in an exhibition of the work of Bob and Roberta Smith at the Harris Museum in Preston in June 2021.

The Portraits





Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of Angelica Kauffman), Royal Academy 2018



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Lorna Simpson), Royal Academy
2018*



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Ana Mandieta), Royal Academy
2018*



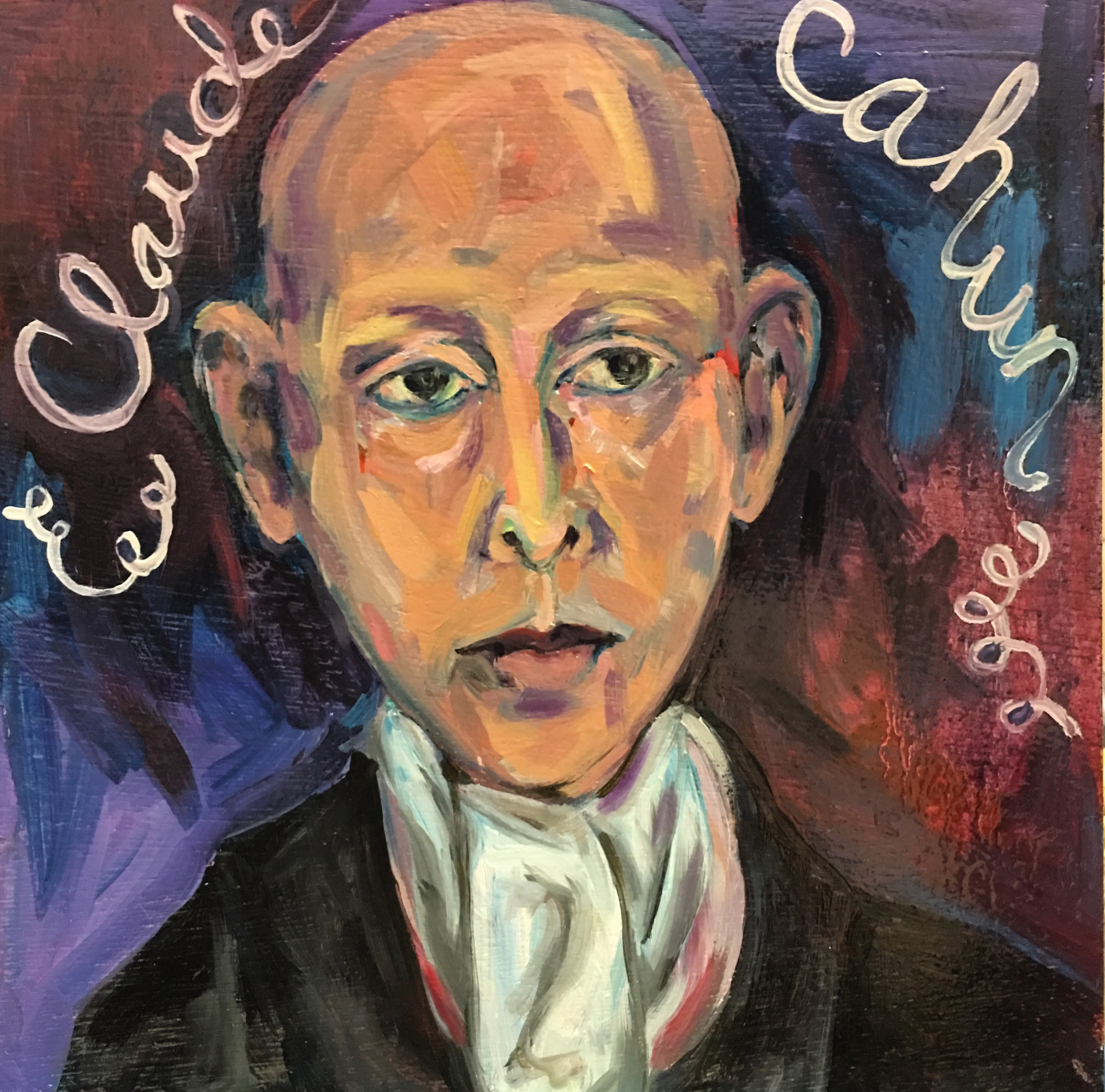
Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of Mona Hatoum), Royal Academy 2018



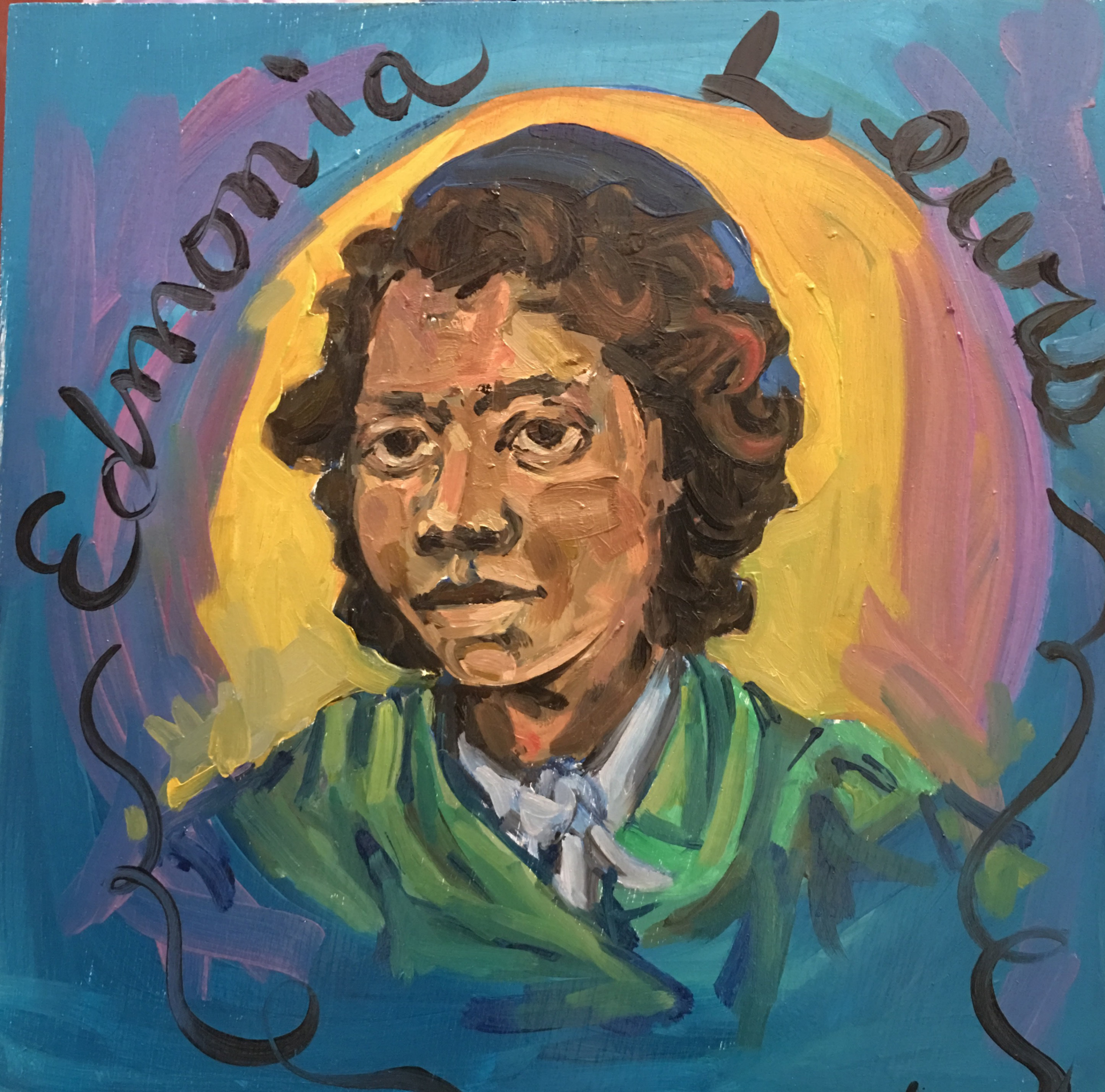
Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of Lee Krasner), Royal Academy 2018



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Alice Neel) Royal Academy 2018*



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Claud Cahun), Royal Academy 2018*



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Edmonia Lewis), Royal Academy
2018*



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Frida Kahlo), Royal Academy 2018*



Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of Sonia Boyce), Royal Academy 2018



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Georgia O'Keefe), Royal Academy
2018*



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Kara Walker), Royal Academy 2018*



Secret to a Good Life, 'This is Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of Sofonisba Anguissola), Royal Academy 2018



*Secret to a Good Life, 'This is
Angelica Kauffman RA (detail of
Yayoi Kusama) Royal Academy
2018*



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THE SECRET
TO A
GOOD LIFE