

ELAINE G. COFFEE

People watching

Elaine G. Coffee's painting *Prelude to the Sixth* is set at a horse race, but the only horse on the canvas is in the far background, its head is obscured and it's trotting out of view. The horse is almost an afterthought. Instead, Coffee's interest is laser-focused on her favorite subjects: the people.

"I really am involved in the figure. My paintings may be set in restaurants or bars, or at the beach, but my subjects have always been the people. It excites me to watch my figures come to life on the canvas. The people drive me forward," Coffee says. "When you're observing all the time, you do start to notice the human condition. Many years ago, I was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and I started observing the people instead of the paintings. The paintings are wonderful, but the people were my show. I watched how they reacted to the paintings, or how they reacted to each other, or how they didn't react at all. That really opened up a Pandora's Box for me."

When her and her husband go out for dinner, he looks at the menu and she looks at the people, the décor, the lighting and she'll usually sneak a picture for a reference—"it's not like I can take out an easel and start painting," she says with a laugh.

Coffee lives in Cave Creek, Arizona, but spends summers in Orleans, Massachusetts, where Tree's Place will be exhibiting her work beginning September 13. The show will feature her people-watching scenes, including restaurant and bar paintings *After Work Respite*, *Anticipation*, and *Tete-a-tete Dining at Luc's*, with its marble face looming over dining guests. Her interior settings, like the locations themselves, are subtle in their lighting and mood. In *Anticipation*, she paints accent lights on bartenders and flickering candles onto tables giving the scene an authentic feel.

"I love these slice-of-life scenes, and to watch as people sit either with someone or by themselves. I can remember once doing a subway painting in New York. In the painting, no one was looking at each other,"



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Coffee says. “The piece was in a gallery in Washington, and they returned it to me because it wouldn’t sell. I sold it on the East Coast in about a week. We’re used to seeing that image—people sitting on a subway ignoring each other—but Washington wasn’t. It’s little things like that are revealed to me just by watching people.”

Coffee says she wants to continue to explore people in her works. “I feel myself wanting to pull back and show fewer people with more of a focus on an intimacy rather than the mob scenes,” she adds. “But other than that I just want to keep watching people and painting them. There are still so many possibilities.” ●

1
Anticipation, oil on canvas, 16 x 20"

2
Prelude to the Sixth, oil on canvas, 20 x 30"

3
Tête-à-tête Dining at Luc's, oil on canvas, 24 x 36"

4
After the Hurricane, oil on canvas, 18 x 24"