

THE ICONIC PORTRAIT STRAND BY  
**NESTOR TOPCHY**



This exhibition presents more than one hundred portraits made over the past twenty years by Houston-based artist Nestor Topchy (b. 1963, New Jersey). *The Iconic Portrait Strand* is an ongoing series of work made using techniques found in religious painting traditions.

The traditional art of icon making associated with the Orthodox Christian Church was developed in Eastern Europe and the Levant in the Byzantine era (324–1453 CE). These icons are generally painted on wood with a gold background and depict a figure or narrative scene to be venerated, such as Jesus Christ, a saint, or a passage from scripture. Traditional icons are based on the belief that the image contains spiritual power. Topchy's paintings are not icons. While he uses time-honored methods and materials, his subjects are his friends and colleagues. The artist explains, "there is an inherent divinity in everyone."

After applying a base of red clay and powdered marble to cloth on a wood support, Topchy paints his portraits with pure pigments and egg yolk binder, then surrounds the figures with a layer of gold leaf. He also uses an assortment of organic materials like honey, beer, vodka, and cloves. He has said that his "process begins with the board. The wood is the tree of life, and the gesso is the bone, and the gold leaf is the spirit." The final steps

involve the application of *ozhivki*, meaning life-giving lines, that highlight or define the details of features, such as strands of hair or creases around the eyes. He then seals the work with oil.

Topchy's series is about connection. According to the artist, it works like a growing strand of "social and cultural DNA" to which he continues to add portraits. A key component was his decision, at the beginning of his process, to draw the sitter from life. The work, therefore, becomes about this interaction, extending the *Iconic Portrait Strand's* emphasis on community.

Nestor Topchy has worked in Houston for more than thirty years. His art explores the mystery of the ephemeral through sculpture, painting, performance, and architecture and is deeply influenced by Zen philosophy, Ukrainian folk art, sacred geometry, and the historical language of the Dada art movement. He studied painting at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore; received his MFA from the University of Houston in 1987; and studied icon writing at Prosopon School of Iconology in New York City. Topchy's first solo exhibition took place in 2011 at the Ivan Honchar Museum National Centre of Folk Culture in Kyiv, Ukraine. *The Iconic Portrait Strand By Nestor Topchy* is the first museum presentation of the artist's portraits.

Michelle White, Senior Curator

*The Iconic Portrait Strand by Nestor Topchy* is curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator.

This exhibition is generously supported by Dillon Kyle and Sam Lasseter; Mary Hale Lovett McLean; Veronica and Douglas Overman; Beverly and Howard Robinson; John and Stephanie Smither Visionary Art Fund; Scott R. Sparvero; Friends of the Artist; the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

## Public Programs

### Curator Talk

Sophie Asakura on Nestor Topchy

Sunday, August 13

3–3:30 p.m.

Main Building

### Artist Talk

Nestor Topchy in conversation with Timothy Morton

Thursday, October 12

7–8 p.m.

Main Building

### Studio Practice

Open onsite studio with Nestor Topchy

September 16, October 7, and November 4

12–4 p.m.

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## Exhibition Dates

August 4, 2023–January 21, 2024

Front: *Iconic Portrait Strand (Forrest Prince)*, 2008–22; Egg tempera and gold leaf on gesso on cloth over plywood. Courtesy of the artist. © Nestor Topchy. Photograph by Caroline Philippone, The Menil Collection