

The Portraits of Emilie Rhys

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St. Peter Street Sketchbook – August 2019

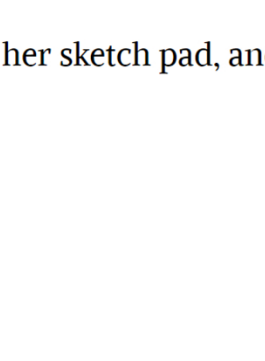


The daughter of noted New Orleans painter Noel Rockmore has blazed her own creative trail, yet there's a similar and mysterious depth in the work of both artists.

– by *Grace Wilson*

photos by *Sophie Germer*

One evening on Frenchmen Street I spied an artist sketching outside the Spotted Cat. She was laser-focused on the jazz band inside. Her pen swung madly, moving to the music, a conductor's baton.



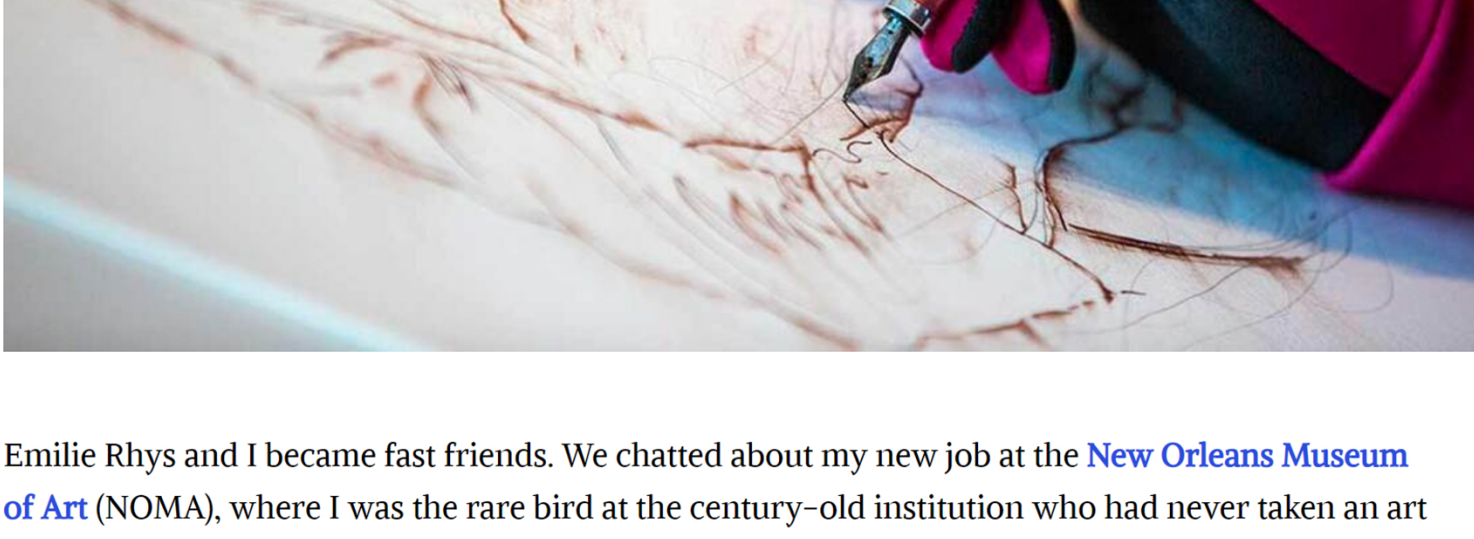
FRENCH QUARTER JOURNAL

This was a few years ago, back when you could walk down Frenchmen without encountering tourist hoards, drunken revelers or noisy groups headed to bachelorette and stag parties. A cover charge was still just a gleam in the Spotted Cat's eye.

As others watched the band, I studied the artist. The musicians came to life on her sketch pad, and I said to no one in particular, "Her work reminds me of Noel Rockmore."

She stopped and looked up at me.

"That was my dad."



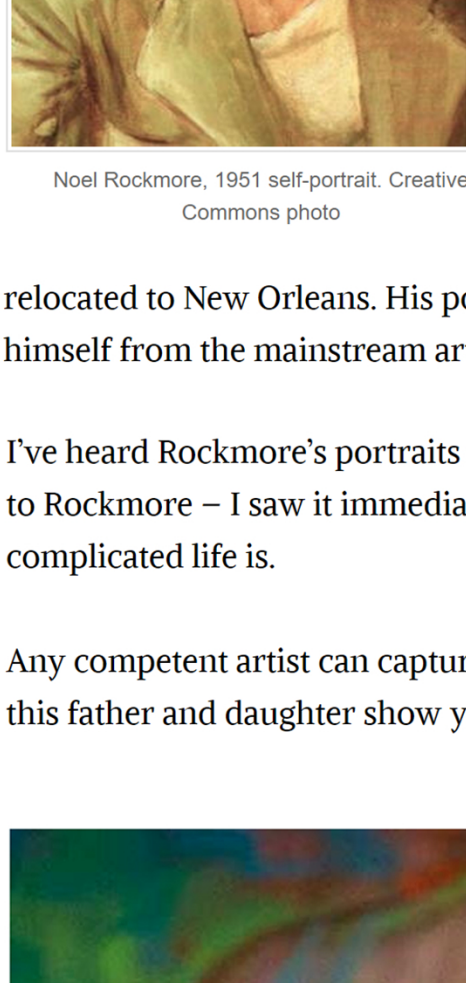
Emilie Rhys and I became fast friends. We chatted about my new job at the [New Orleans Museum of Art](#) (NOMA), where I was the rare bird at the century-old institution who had never taken an art history class.

In fact, my chemist mother had insisted I sign up for electives more practical than art.

She began by drawing pictures of what she imagined as the perfect family unit. Emilie eventually taught herself drawing and painting techniques inspired by masters she admired: Giotto, Rembrandt, El Greco, Cezanne and Picasso among others.

It was only through studying these masters, she developed a base of technical skills. Emilie was 20 years old before she joined her father in New Orleans. During those tumultuous 10 months he put her to work on mural commissions.

One of these murals is on view today at the [New Orleans Jazz Museum](#) on Esplanade.



Noel Rockmore, 1951 self-portrait. Creative Commons photo

A show I wish was still on view today had its day in 2010 at NOMA, a contemporary exhibition called "[Swamp Tours](#)."

It introduced me to self-taught artists like Sister Gertrude Morgan.

That same show featured Noel Rockmore. His work was like nothing I had ever seen.

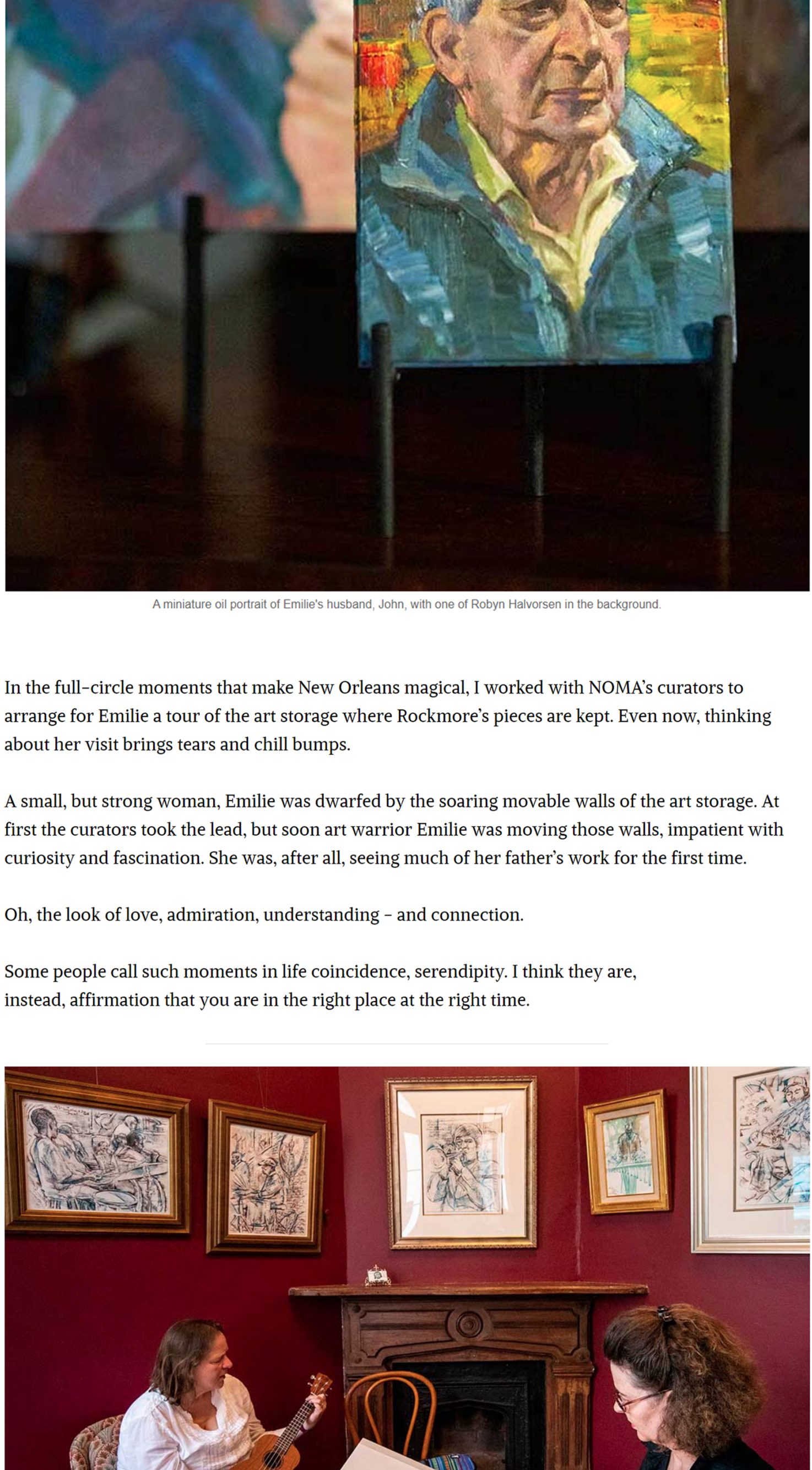
Rockmore – born Noel Montgomery Davis – was the son of two artists. He came of age in New York at a time when many of his art contemporaries embraced abstract expressionism.

Davis became famous quickly and at a young age, but instead of following the popular abstract trend, he stayed true to his love of portraiture.

Against the advice of his artistic handlers, Davis changed his professional name to his mother's maiden name, Rockmore, and relocated to New Orleans. His portraits and other paintings became increasingly surreal as he exiled himself from the mainstream art scene and immersed himself in the 1960s and 1970s French Quarter.

I've heard Rockmore's portraits described as ghoulish, haunting. There's also a depth and a darkness to Rockmore – I saw it immediately in Emilie's work, as well -- a realness that reflects how complicated life is.

Any competent artist can capture the surface of the New Orleans' music scene, but the work of this father and daughter show you there's more going on than meets the eye.



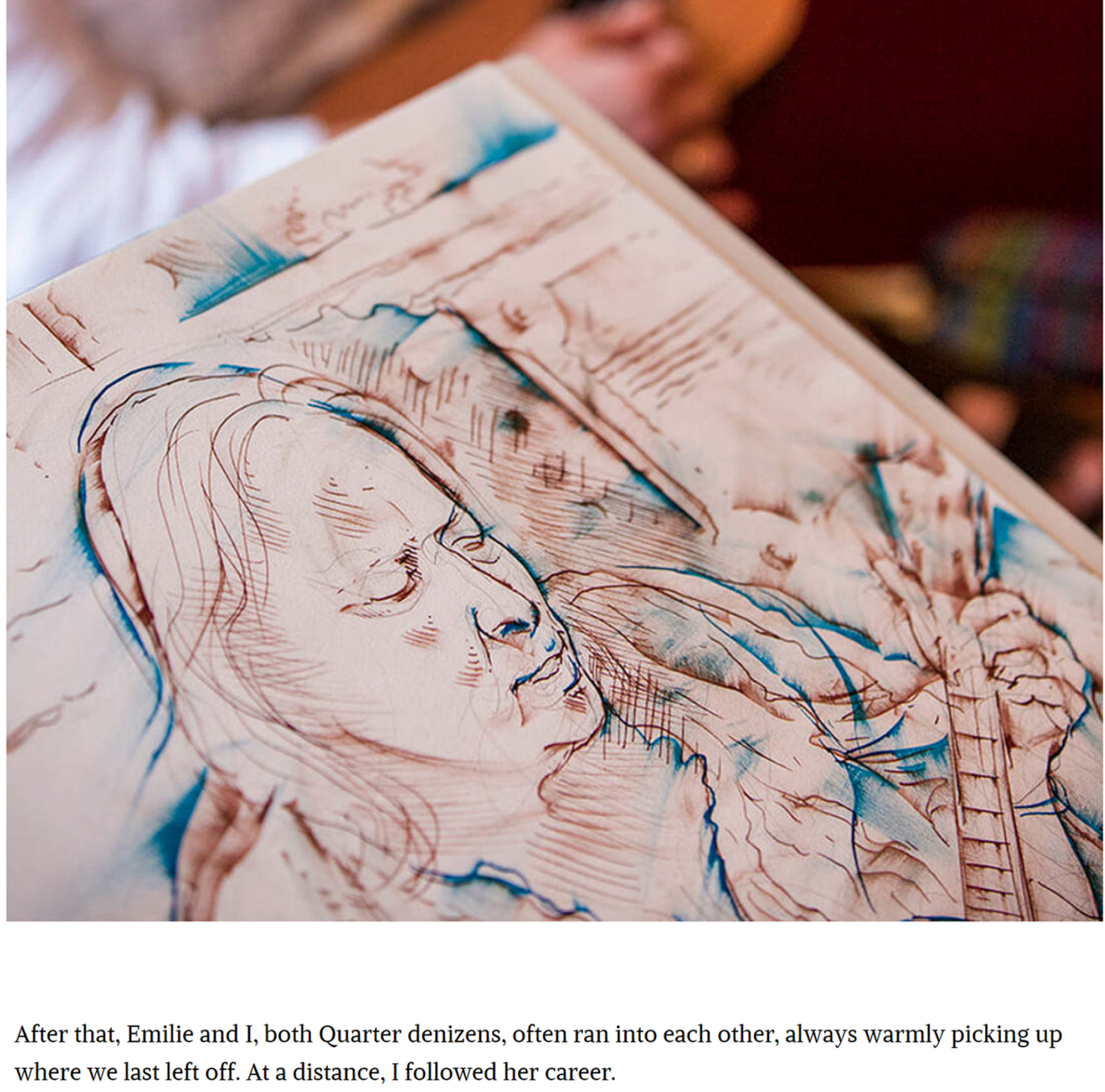
A miniature oil portrait of Emilie's husband, John, with one of Robyn Halvorsen in the background.

In the full-circle moments that make New Orleans magical, I worked with NOMA's curators to arrange for Emilie a tour of the art storage where Rockmore's pieces are kept. Even now, thinking about her visit brings tears and chill bumps.

A small, but strong woman, Emilie was dwarfed by the soaring movable walls of the art storage. At first the curators took the lead, but soon art warrior Emilie was moving those walls, impatient with curiosity and fascination. She was, after all, seeing much of her father's work for the first time.

Oh, the look of love, admiration, understanding – and connection.

Some people call such moments in life coincidence, serendipity. I think they are, instead, affirmation that you are in the right place at the right time.



After that, Emilie and I, both Quarter denizens, often ran into each other, always warmly picking up where we last left off. At a distance, I followed her career.

By 2015, fans had such an interest in Emilie's vast body of work that she launched **her own website**, and a year later opened a gallery near the corner of Royal on Toulouse.

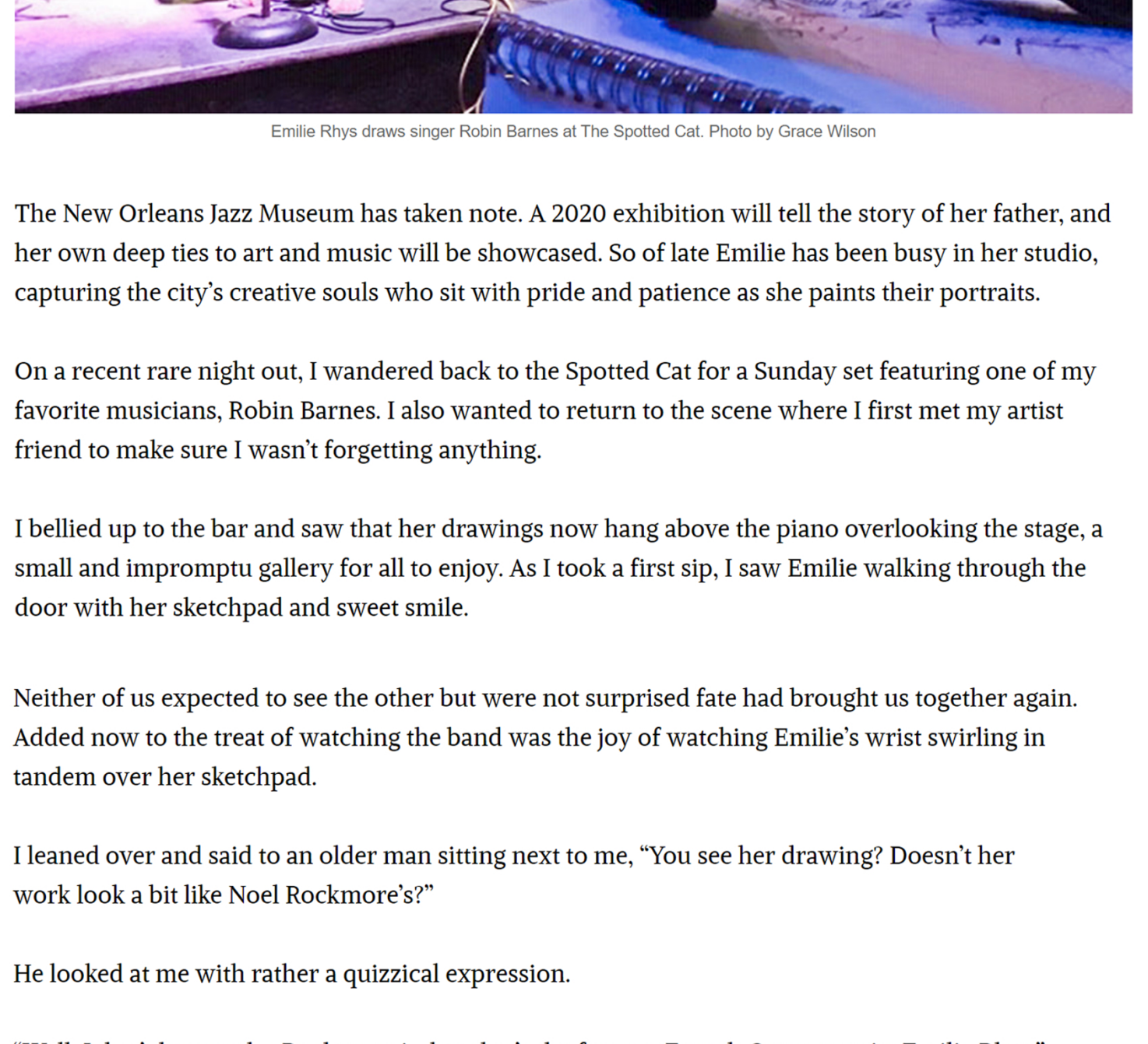
Her art continues to evolve. Pen and pencil sketches come to life with a swipe of her signature glove. Ink smears become strokes of genius and genuine musical moments. You can see, and almost hear, the sound waves.

Her passion for the music and the musicians is clear as you watch her work. She seems to fall into a trance as she draws, taking in the scene as a whole and letting her hand capture the structure of the stage and the musicians.

She alternates between capturing the entire band and the face of one musician. She'll stop for an occasional personal groove, and she applauds the band after every song.

Emilie is working on her 100th sketchbook of New Orleans night scenes. Often a drawing gets more detailed or a wash of gouache before it's framed and hung.

For each piece sold, Emilie gives a portion of profit back to the musicians, paying homage to the talent of the musical city she loves so much.



Emilie Rhys draws singer Robin Barnes at The Spotted Cat. Photo by Grace Wilson

The New Orleans Jazz Museum has taken note. A 2020 exhibition will tell the story of her father, and her own deep ties to art and music will be showcased. So of late Emilie has been busy in her studio, capturing the city's creative souls who sit with pride and patience as she paints their portraits.

On a recent rare night out, I wandered back to the Spotted Cat for a Sunday set featuring one of my favorite musicians, Robin Barnes. I also wanted to return to the scene where I first met my artist friend to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything.

I bellied up to the bar and saw that her drawings now hang above the piano overlooking the stage, a small and impromptu gallery for all to enjoy. As I took a first sip, I saw Emilie walking through the door with her sketchpad and sweet smile.

Neither of us expected to see the other but were not surprised fate had brought us together again. Added now to the treat of watching the band was the joy of watching Emilie's wrist swirling in tandem over her sketchpad.

I leaned over and said to an older man sitting next to me, "You see her drawing? Doesn't her work look a bit like Noel Rockmore's?"

He looked at me with rather a quizzical expression.

"Well, I don't know who Rockmore is, but that's the famous French Quarter artist Emilie Rhys."

