

# AND THE WINNER IS

By Christine Egnoski

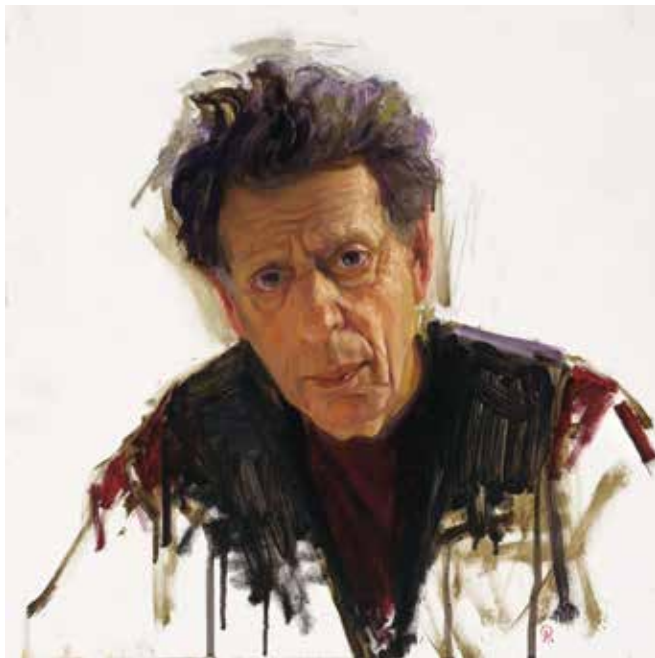
**T**his past July, someone in Illinois beat the odds and won \$1.33 billion in the Mega Millions jackpot lottery, a life changing amount of money. The odds of winning the jackpot were 1 in 303 million. So many people were entering for a chance to win the big prize that 33,360 tickets were being sold per minute.

The Portrait Society's annual premiere

competition doesn't feature a billion dollar prize, but it has, over the last 24 years, grown to be one of the most prestigious awards in the world. The International—a competition for portrait and figurative art—receives over 2,500 entries each year, which are juried by a panel of three artists over a period of several days. The selected 20 finalists bring their

original artwork to the annual conference where another panel of three judges determines the final awards.

This year over \$110,000 in cash and awards were presented including a \$25,000 cash award to Luis Alvarez Roure, this year's Draper Grand Prize winner. Alvarez Roure was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, and at an early age was passionate about the arts, creating meticulous realist drawings of people. But it was music that he initially focused on and eventually moved to New



Luis Alvarez Roure, *Philip Glass*, oil, 46 x 52" (116 x 132 cm). Also acquired by the National Portrait Gallery.



Luis Alvarez Roure, *Hidden Wounds*, oil, 24 x 18" (60 x 45 cm). Finalist in Outwin.

York City to finish his master's degree in music with the renowned Cuban-American pedagogue, German Diez Nieto. While he was a graduate student, he enrolled at the Art Students League of New York, where he studied drawing, painting and anatomy classes. His years at the League reignited his love of drawing and provided him a strong sense of direction and confidence. As he was transitioning from music to a full-time artist, Alvarez Roure found the demands of his music studies had prevented him from establishing connections and a network of artist friends. He didn't know any galleries or agents or had exhibited his work in public showings. He then made the decision to enter competitions and little by little, he started gaining recognition.

In 2019 he was a finalist in the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition with his painting, *Hidden Wounds*. His subject was his childhood best friend who spent almost 20 years in the U.S. Navy. They were reunited at Alvarez Roure's first solo exhibition in 2016, and he immediately knew he wanted to paint him. Alvarez Roure shared his process of creating the composition, "After many hours of sharing experiences, some very painful, he posed for me for a life study, and I took photographs in order to continue working on the painting back in my studio. The portrait became something much deeper than just his physical appearance. His face is half in the light and half in the darkness, and the background is a ripped and stained flag. The red of the flag drips on his shoulders and his body is faded where some of the red of the flag can be seen through." In addition, he was invited to participate in two consecutive exhibitions at the Smithsonian's *National Portrait Gallery: The Outwin 2019: American Portraiture Today and Recent Acquisitions*. The National Portrait Gallery acquired Alvarez Roure's portraits of composer Philip Glass and violinist Joshua Bell for their permanent collection. In 2020 he was named a Living Master by the Art Renewal Center.

In one of Alvarez Roure's paintings, he had the opportunity to combine music, which has become his greatest source of inspiration as well as his greatest mystery to decode as an art form. Because of this he has been experimenting by juxtaposing realism and



Luis Alvarez Roure, *Joshua Bell*, oil, 60 x 40" (152 x 101 cm)

## THE ART OF THE PORTRAIT

abstraction. When the opportunity to paint acclaimed British cellist Steve Isserlis came along, he thought of making a composition in which he divided the canvas in half, (or approximately so) one half for Isserlis and the other half to paint an abstract space that can be felt and seen and may give room for the viewer to think about music. At the time he was also learning about the golden ratio. The entire piece was worked meticulously but in a somewhat unorthodox way, cutting his feet out of the canvas and making the cello and the blank space protagonists of the scene. Alvarez Roure says, "I wanted to paint Steven in the act of making music and wanted to express it with the idea that what we are experiencing doesn't stop inside the canvas, but that it extends beyond our visual capabilities and imagination."

Alvarez Roure's Grand Prize work *Masquerade* shows a man covering his face

with makeup as if he is preparing to perform an act. The inspiration came from the opera "Pagliacci" by Ruggero Leoncavallo, specifically from the aria "Vesti la Giubba" when the clown has to perform his act after learning of a tragic situation. Alvarez Roure says, "In a similar way to the aria, my subject shows an array of contrary emotions and feelings such as love, hate, strength, and weakness to convey a spiritual battle. However, my painting is not embedded with a singular nor a particular story. My painting is a metaphor for humanity confronting life in situations of pain, misery, and tragedy. There is no clown nor an act to follow after the makeup in the dressing room. The man symbolizes us all as we metaphorically put the mask to our emotions and feelings as the show of life must go on."

Upon accepting the award, the artist thanked his wife, children and his mother

and dedicated the honor to his father, who passed away last June. He says, "My parents always had a strong sense of what the visual arts meant for me since I was a young boy. When I started getting involved in music, I was already fairly accomplished at drawing portraits. It was my first encounter with any art form, and my parents seemed to know from the beginning that I would return to it at some point in my life. So, they were not surprised when I made the decision to devote myself full time to being an artist."

With his parent's and family's support, Alvarez Roure successfully made the transition from a music career to an art career and credits entering competitions as a conduit to his success. He used them as a way to inspire him to raise the bar in his own work, push his development as an artist and get recognition for his work. "Competitions, I think, are a great stimulant to keep your



Luis Alvarez Roure, *The Artist's Father*, oil, 22 x 16" (55 x 40 cm)



Luis Alvarez Roure, *Golden Moment: A Portrait of Steven Isserlis*, oil, 50 x 60" (127 x 152 cm)



Luis Alvarez Roure, *The Artist's Mother*, oil, 22 x 16" (55 x 40 cm)

goals in check. I have been a finalist at many competitions throughout the years including some very prestigious ones like The Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition and the Art Renewal Center. I was in the 'Select Fifty' at The Portrait Society of America's International Portrait Competition, but I was never selected as a finalist until this year," says the artist. He continues, "Since 2014, I've submitted work to The Portrait Society (with a few interruptions in between), this was my fifth attempt. Something I never did was to erase my rejection emails. I always took them with a level of disagreement at first, but most importantly, I put a lot of attention and faith

in the very last sentence that comes with the announcement which reads something like: 'even though your work was not accepted this year, we encourage you to take risks and enter competitions...'. This, for me, served as a reminder of what it takes to be an artist of a high level and that if this were to be something easy, maybe it wouldn't be so unique and special. This particular phrase was fuel to my soul. I used it as a motivation to push myself. To my surprise, this year, for the first time, I was a finalist, and to my delight I won the Draper Grand Prize, something I only dreamed of back in 2014 and because of it, became a reality."



Luis Alvarez Roure, *Masquerade*, oil on linen, 46 x 40" (116 x 101 cm)

When winning a premier competition, such as The Portrait Society's The International, the honor is intrinsic in the award, but the cash can greatly benefit the winning artist. That is why our chair Michael Shane Neal made the decision to double the prize money for our top award in The International to \$50,000.

We invite you to create your best work and enter it in next year's The International, and I leave you with closing words by Alvarez Roure, "Perseverance is undoubtedly a key to achieving one's goals. Had I quit after my first or second rejection, I wouldn't be where I am today or closer to where I want to be tomorrow." [📖](#)

*Christine Egnoski has been the Executive Director of the Portrait Society of America for 24 years. She recently interviewed Portrait Society's Draper Grand Prize winner Luis Alvarez Roure in his studio in New Jersey.*