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SPILLMAN | BLACKWELL GALLERY TO PRESENT PAINTINGS BASED ON FAMED STORYVILLE PORTRAITS

A Preservation of Light by Dana Nehdaran interprets E.J. Bellocq's famous photographs

NEW ORLEANS, La—SPILLMAN | BLACKWELL Fine Art is pleased to announce the opening of *A Preservation of Light* by New York-based painter Dana Nehdaran. The exhibition opens October 1st and runs through November 23rd. The opening reception will take place October 1st from 6-9pm at 866 Camp Street in the heart of the New Orleans Arts District, in participation with Art for Arts' Sake Downtown and the First Saturday gallery openings. Guests will enjoy light bites, live jazz in the courtyard by Julian Addison's "Triple Shot", and a full bar sponsored by the Sazerac Company, serving the official cocktail of New Orleans—*The Sazerac*. Dana Nehdaran is an Iranian Jewish artist who studied painting at Sooreh Art University in Shiraz. In 2015, the artist relocated to New York where he currently lives and works. Of the more than eight series created by Nehdaran, all have a focus on the tension between past and present. *A Preservation of Light* is the newest body of work by the artist and draws inspiration from the famed E.J. Bellocq portraits of the women of New Orleans' historic Storyville district.

E.J. Bellocq (American, 1873-1949) remains an ambiguous figure in history. After Bellocq died in 1949, eighty-nine glass plate negatives of portraits of female prostitutes from New Orleans' famous Storyville district were found in his desk, and were inherited by his brother Leo, a Jesuit priest who promptly gave them away to an antique shop. All of the images were taken circa 1912 by Bellocq, who was a commercial photographer practicing in New Orleans and who may have been hired to shoot the women for the famed "blue book", or simply for his own artistic pleasure. These haunting and powerful portraits are the only examples of Bellocq's work to survive, thanks to efforts by famed American photographer Lee Friedlander who acquired them from a shopkeeper in 1966 that had them stored in the dilapidated bathroom of the old slave quarters behind Preservation Hall in the French Quarter. As such, many of the negatives sustained damage, primarily water damage in Hurricane Betsy. Friedlander ultimately produced most of the prints in existence today.

"On a trip to New Orleans, I stepped into A Gallery for Fine Photography that carries several of Friedlander's carefully reproduced prints and was, as most people are, immediately drawn into the gaze of these women. I love historical photographs and have painted a similar series, *Esther's Children*, based on photos of early twentieth century Jews in Iran, my ancestors. When the COVID-19 pandemic gripped New York City, I found myself surrounded at my home studio with huge empty canvases, my memories of New Orleans, and the haunting reflection of Bellocq's muses. I found solace in the ghosts of these long dead women. I befriended them and their casual familiarity peering at me from the gold-toned printing paper. I hoped to re-envision their spirit, recognize their lives' limited choices, and imagine the stories behind each and every one of them. We do not know their names, but Bellocq captured their story in the physics of light and silver. His vision became my vision as I worked to recreate that ray of light using acrylic, oil, copper, and the soot of beeswax candle (lamp black oil). These paintings represent my version of a love poem both to Bellocq and to each of the women whose life he touched and momentarily captured forever." - Nehdaran, 2022

"We are simply thrilled to present this work", says gallery Co-owner/Director Leslie-Claire Spillman. "Seeing these portraits in the person for the first time was an emotional experience for me. In my two decades in this business, I've never seen anything quite like them. The paintings seem to breathe. The eyes of the women, often meeting the gaze of the viewer directly, have a spark of life. The large scale of the paintings adds to their ability to pull you in and make it hard to look away. They have a presence that is palpable, and the deep connection that the artist feels with the subjects, and his desire to reveal their humanity through the work is obvious."

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Conceived by lifelong friends in 2020 amid the pandemic lockdown after the gallery where they both worked closed, SPILLMAN | BLACKWELL is a new women-owned gallery that presents a wide range of programming with a focus on being an open and inviting gallery experience for its visitors. The gallery seeks to promote its artists locally and beyond, with a large and diverse roster of artists working in a wide variety of media and processes and offering a range of services including installation and logistics to collectors, artists, galleries, and institutions nationwide. Owners Amy Blackwell and Leslie-Claire Spillman are pleased to present *A Preservation of Light* in their space at 866 Camp Street (on the corner at St. Joseph), and online at www.spillmanblackwellart.com.

