

Older women 'Feeling Our Age' in portrait, essay collection

Column: The senior crowd will be exploding over coming decades. Artist's show suggests how to do it right.



Artist Kathleen Cosgrove stands alongside her portrait subjects at the "Feeling Our Age" exhibit on display at Watermark Laguna Niguel. (Photo by Charlie Newman, courtesy Watermark Laguna Niguel)



By **TERI SFORZA** | tsforza@scng.com | Orange County Register

"It's probably happened to all of us who have reached a certain age," Cheryl M. wrote when she was 78. "You walk by a mirror and catch a glimpse of someone you don't know. How did this happen that I am now this whole different person, when I feel like I am still the same?"

It's a question more and more of us will be pondering as we face our reflections. Today, about 1 in 6 Americans is 65 or older. By 2050, nearly 1 in 4 of us will be, the U.S. Census Bureau projects.

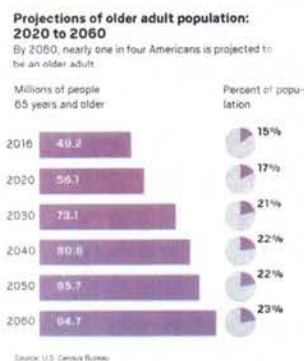
"Mostly, shock!" Debra C. wrote at 70. "Who is that person in the mirror? First I

don't recognize her, then I see my mom. Next comes the grumbling with this body's latest shortcomings. What I resent the most, however, is the assumption that I can be fed the most ridiculous spiels and schemes assuming that I am feeble-minded or naive. All of my hard-earned knowledge about cars, motors, electronics, plumbing, building, computers, finance, management and 70+ years of life experience, go unrecognized, and a gentle imbecility is assumed. Grr.

"Invisibility, for me, implies disrespect, unimportance, irrelevance, unvalued. I reject it."



Kathleen Cosgrove's painting of Cheryl M. (Courtesy Cosgrove)

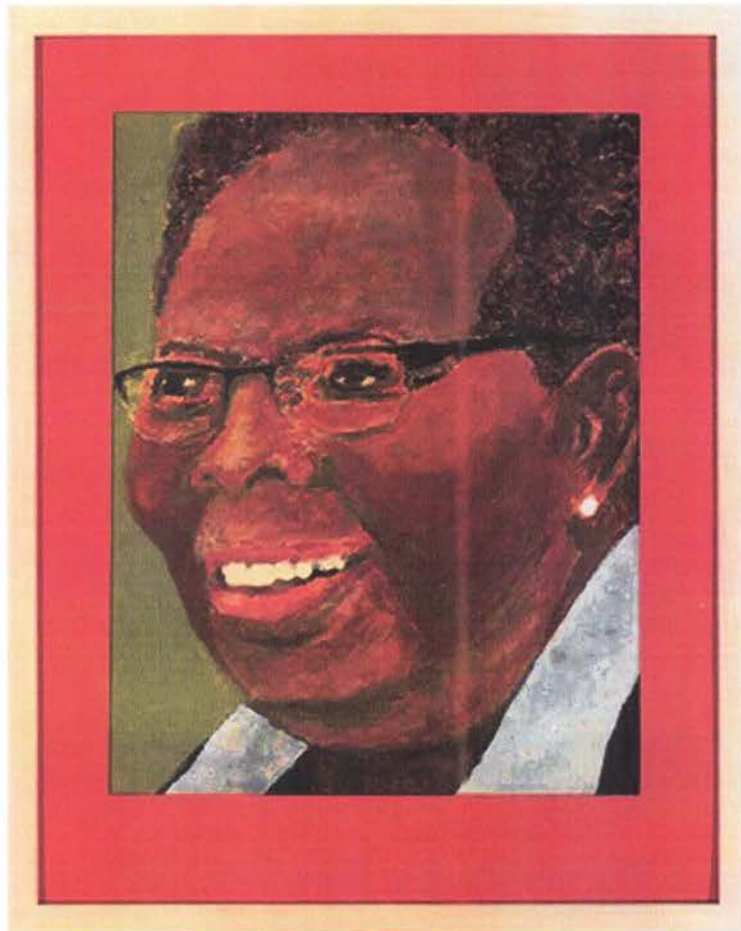


As does [Kathleen Cosgrove](#), the artist who painted them for "[Feeling Our Age](#)," a portrait and essay collection capturing the wisdom and reflection of 60-plus women aged 60-plus.

In it, they ponder their lives and their passions, their struggles and their faith, their plans and their hopes. They worked as legislators, pilots, nurses, teachers, entrepreneurs, activists and artists — many, many artists — and continue contributing in "retirement," often launching second careers.

The show is open to the public through the end of June at [Watermark Laguna Niguel](#), a senior retirement community, then will travel to other Watermark properties.

"I have the energy to make my community and village a better place," wrote [Mary G.](#), a retired nurse administrator in Maua, Kenya. "I offer an Alternative Rites of Passage training every December as an alternative to female circumcision, which is still practiced in our area. Our training includes information on the female body and sex education. Girls and mothers of tomorrow must be empowered with this knowledge. The girls' training has awakened the men to request a seminar for the boys. I hope this is an indication of how much even one senior can impact the community."



Portrait of Mary G. by Kathleen Cosgrove (Courtesy Cosgrove)

Act 2

Indeed. Cosgrove grew up in Berkeley in the 1960s before moving to the Pacific Northwest. She married, raised kids, ran a lobbying firm representing railroads, steel mills, arts organizations. Then she sold it, returned to school, and graduated from Pacific Northwest College of Art with a BFA — at age 51.

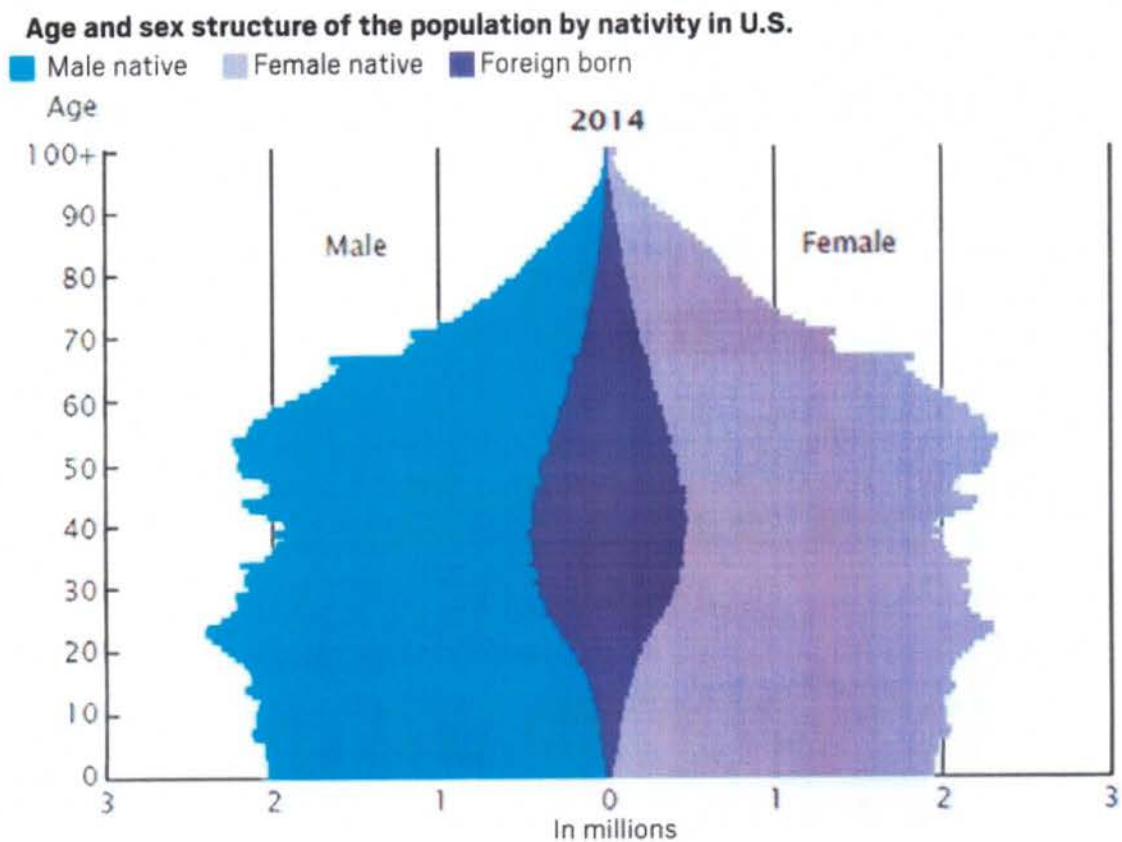
“There were all these young kids!” Cosgrove said. “I had the desire, but I didn’t have the skills yet. I learned so much from that experience. It was humbling.”

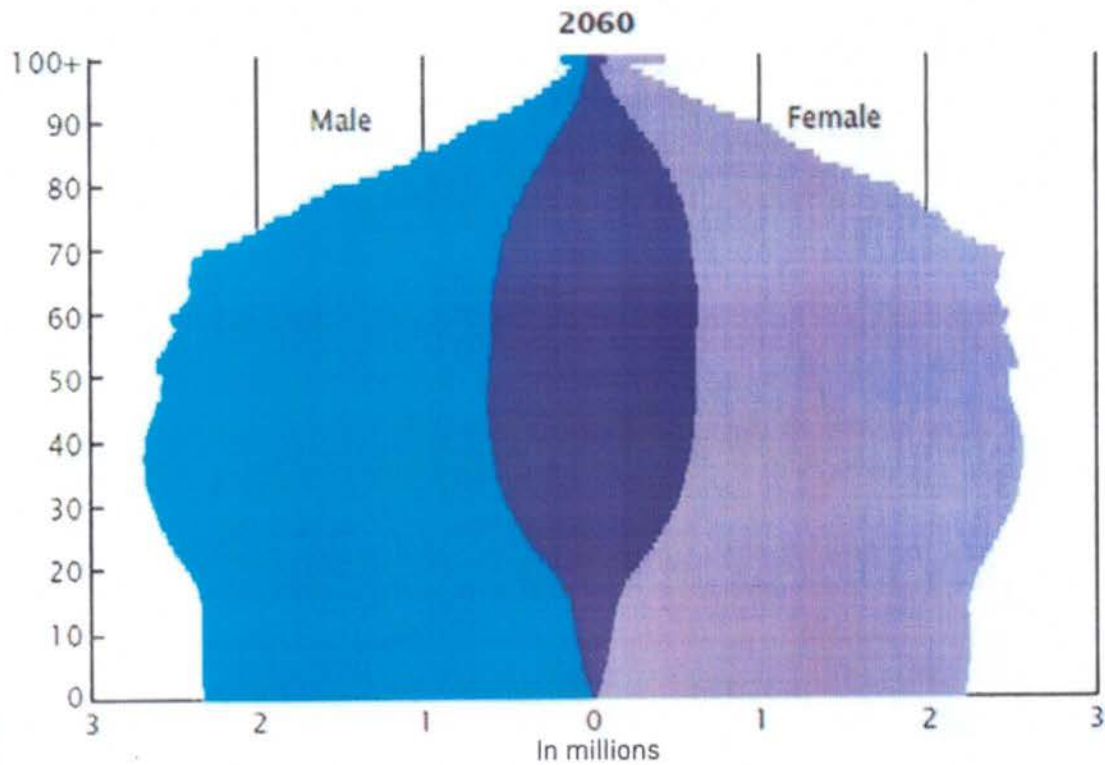
Portraits were never her thing — she loves abstracts — but the pandemic sparked a rage. As an over-60, she was among those labeled vulnerable. She had to isolate from friends, from family, from life. She thought about her grandmother, who had been institutionalized and was rarely discussed, and felt acute “generational injustice.” She began asking others how they felt about growing older, expecting a reflection of her own anger — and was awed to find so many expressing joy, gratitude, resilience and purpose.



Kathleen Cosgrove (Photo by Teri Sforza)

Cosgrove studied. Learned to paint portraits. Collected photographs from each woman. Pondered their essays and produced slightly abstract, distinctly childlike images that play well with the show’s theme.





“I started this project because I was angry. My emotions were raw. I wanted to change the narrative about older women,” she said in notes to the show. “I believe we need to fight age discrimination, be more inclusive and reinvent how we talk and think about older persons. But I believe this starts by listening, and recognizing the many ways that older people make the world a better place.

“I am no longer angry; I am a different person. This project, these women, changed my life.”

(R)aging nation

There are more kids than retirees right now — but within the next decade, that will flip, according to the U.S. Census.

The 2020 census counted 56 million Americans age 65 or older.

By 2060, there will be 94.7 million, the census says.

It’s called the “silver tsunami.”

“I’m part of a demographic with heftier wallets and purchasing power, deserving of basic human respect,” wrote [Jane CS](#). “Advertisers, politicians, et al., take note!”

[Becky H.](#) is among those taking stock. “I don’t know what I am ‘supposed’ to feel like,” she wrote, “but there is a newfound freedom and, at the same time, an ever-present awareness that life is NOW! I do everything I can to make a positive difference in the lives of others and then reap the joy that comes from doing so.”

The years grant insight, if not wisdom: [Marilyn B.](#) has learned that what we think is past remains present within us, and that it can be rekindled and reclaimed. Everything and everyone is interconnected. Every moment is precious.

“The second you are born, you are one second closer to dying,” [Robyn B.](#) wrote when she was 81. “So what you do today is what matters. And I do that with a grin.”



Residents view portraits in the “Feeling Our Age” exhibit, created by artist Kathleen Cosgrove. (Photo by Charlie Newman, courtesy Watermark Laguna Niguel)

There’s a refreshing sense of mischievousness: “Very busy. No naps. Just coffee!” [Ann S.](#) wrote at 74. “What I have learned over my life is to not wait for others to write the script. No guarantees for the future. Carpe diem. Figure out how to enjoy every day so you can go forth with positivity, and then show up.”

And there’s an enormous sense of gratitude: “Each day feels like a gift, and I find myself in awe at the littlest joy,” [Sue O.](#) wrote at age 77. “The shape of a tree, the exuberance of a puppy, the light shimmering on a mountain top, the smell of rain, the hug from a friend ... the list is endless as is my sense of gratitude. Age has highlighted life and I feel more alive than ever before.”

A simple secret: So long as you’re of service to others, you’ll always have a sense of purpose, [Kate C.](#) wrote at 69.

And no matter one’s numerical age, one can retain a childlike wonder and playfulness,



Kathleen Cosgrove leads a discussion with residents during a community gathering at Watermark Laguna Niguel as part of the “Feeling Our Age” exhibit programming. (Photo by Charlie Newman, courtesy Watermark Laguna Niguel)

Challenge stereotypes

Cosgrove was 71 when she wrote her own essay and painted her own portrait for the show, which transformed her.

"I finally realized I always linked growing old with dying," she wrote. "When I saw people who looked old, they reminded me of my mortality. By talking and meeting all these women, I now know older people are just like everyone else, they come in all shapes and sizes, active, vital and exuberant. ... We are going to live longer than any generation before us and the world needs to get ready because here we come. Now I am happy."

Now approaching 75, Cosgrove maintains a full-time studio practice in Vancouver, Washington, and has a second studio in Manzanita, Oregon. She found her way to Watermark quite by accident; she was helping a friend find a senior community, and they all got to talking about art, and Watermark bought some of her abstracts and then ... this.

"At Watermark, we see aging as renewal, purpose and connection," Sundeep Jeste, executive director of Watermark Laguna Niguel, said in a statement. "This exhibition reflects our mission to honor every story and challenge aging stereotypes."

To regular readers of this column: A confession and an apology. You may notice that the 15-year-old mug shot of this humble scribe (with dark tresses) has been replaced by a new one (displaying my sizzling silvers). That ancient photo was not used out of vanity; rather, we lost our photo studio when we moved from the Big Orange Building in Santa Ana in 2016, and not even the dazzlingly talented Mindy Schauer could make me look human in the Target parking structure where we tried to take a new one.

But this show made it clear something must be done. So I stole to a deserted corner of the YMCA and snapped a new one. I agree with [Lelia SW.](#), who wrote, "Being white haired is very liberating. I feel respected and accepted and never dismissed for my age. May everyone have the pleasure of reaching a stage in their lives where they can relax, appreciate and feel grateful for miracles happening all around us."



Kathleen Cosgrove (Photo by Teri Sforza)



Artist Kathleen Cosgrove stands beside two of her portraits featured in the "Feeling Our Age" exhibit at Watermark Laguna Niguel. (Photo by Charlie Newman, courtesy Watermark Laguna Niguel)

And may everyone be lucky enough to feel like [Edith B.](#) "I have so much more in me," she wrote. "I can't slow down. I continue sailing along, knowing life is short, behaving as if I have all the time in the world. ... I choose sun over the fear of wrinkles, activity over the sedentary, and stillness above worry. I wouldn't trade my wisdom and learning for youth and agility. I am at peace and calm with this place in life."

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