

**M**y interview with Walt Curtis starts with enthusiasm. He is still high from his recent 60th birthday party (July 4, no less) and opening at Mark Woolley Gallery. He is animated and vocal as he celebrates with a waterfall of words what seems to be a life enjoyed and fully lived.

Unofficially deemed Portland's "Street Poet Laureate" for 30 years, he has supplied this city with a broad mix of poetry, prose, essays and art. He is eclecticism incarnate, with a résumé reaching into nearly every facet of the local arts community.

Curtis authored *Mala Noche*, a novella that became director Gus Van Sant's first film. He is the subject of Bill Plympton's documentary *Peckernack Poet*. Small-press collections of his poetry include 1971's *The Erotic Flying Machine*, 1974's *The Roses of Portland* and 1983's *Rhymes for Alice Blue Light*. In addition, for 30 years he has served as host of the KBOO-FM show *Talking Earth*.

But right now, Curtis is excited about his new collection of paintings, *Native Spirits*.

Although not a Native American, he proudly stakes his claim as a native of the Pacific Northwest. He has immersed himself in the wilds of Oregon, frequently mentioning the Clackamas and Molalla rivers and the energy he draws from them. As he says, "The landscape is in my blood and brain somehow."

Curtis' paintings are a bright mix of color, sexuality and Native American imagery. Some are on canvas, others on wood or rock; occasionally, he paints over other people's castoff "sofa" paintings he's come across, judiciously allowing some of the previous work to play through his own strokes.

At times his painting moves past the canvas, enveloping the entire frame. He even merges poetry and art, including poems on the backs of some paintings.

Many of Curtis' recent works are inspired by the famous Columbia Gorge petroglyph "She

## Walt of all trades

Portland legend looks back on his life

BY RICHARD BRAY

Who Watches," which he has visited at least eight times and has inspired his past poetry. He attempts to capture the essence of primitive symbols and rock art from around The Dalles and what used to be Celilo Falls before the dams were built.

Worth noting is Curtis' sensitivity to "borrowing" these Native American images, particularly "She Who Watches." He consulted with Lillian Pitt, an important local Native American artist, about the themes of these pieces. Her response: "Do what you feel is right, do what your heart tells you."

Curtis explains: "I didn't think it was fair for me to deal with Native American stuff when I'm not Native American, unless I knew and had some respect for it. I'm not trying to take risks or be disrespectful to native culture; I'm saying that that's part of all of our culture, our heritage in the Pacific Northwest."

To drive his point home, Curtis adds, "I'm not a white Indian, but I identify with the primordial and archetypal simplicity of native rock art."

According to Curtis, response to the show and its origins has been positive and supportive, no doubt reflecting his reverence and intent for his subject matter. "I don't want native people to feel I've disrespected them by dealing with their often religious symbols."

In a reflective mood, Curtis says of his art and process: "I'm a poet and a writer who's also been painting, and in my work, just as in my poems, images come up.... I have to have an image."

Explaining further, he adds: "For me, a painting is more of a discovery than a poem or an essay. It's something I can really get involved in, and then I end up with

a beautiful or interesting object."

Curtis brings a unique personal vision and philosophy to his art. "Nature is part of our sexual and spiritual life, and possibly that's a recurring theme in my work—the vitality of life itself as manifested in nature and as manifested in our healthy, vibrant spirits if we will really go with the best part of ourselves."

More than once, Curtis pays homage to others in Portland's cultural community who have been supportive of his work and life and who also take risks. He cites Van Sant; Woolley; Thomas Lauderdale of Pink Martini; William Jamison, the late gay gallery owner; and John Gogol, an ethnographer and expert on Native American basketry.

Curtis easily moves from subject to subject, seamlessly sliding into a short discussion of homosexuality in Native American culture and their acceptance, almost reverence, for the power of what they sometimes referred to as the "third sex." He says native people believe homosexuals are "natural, they have more power, more potency than heterosexuals—male or female—because they know both sides of the sexual paradigm...shamen were often gay men."

Walt au naturel



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

"The Water Devil"

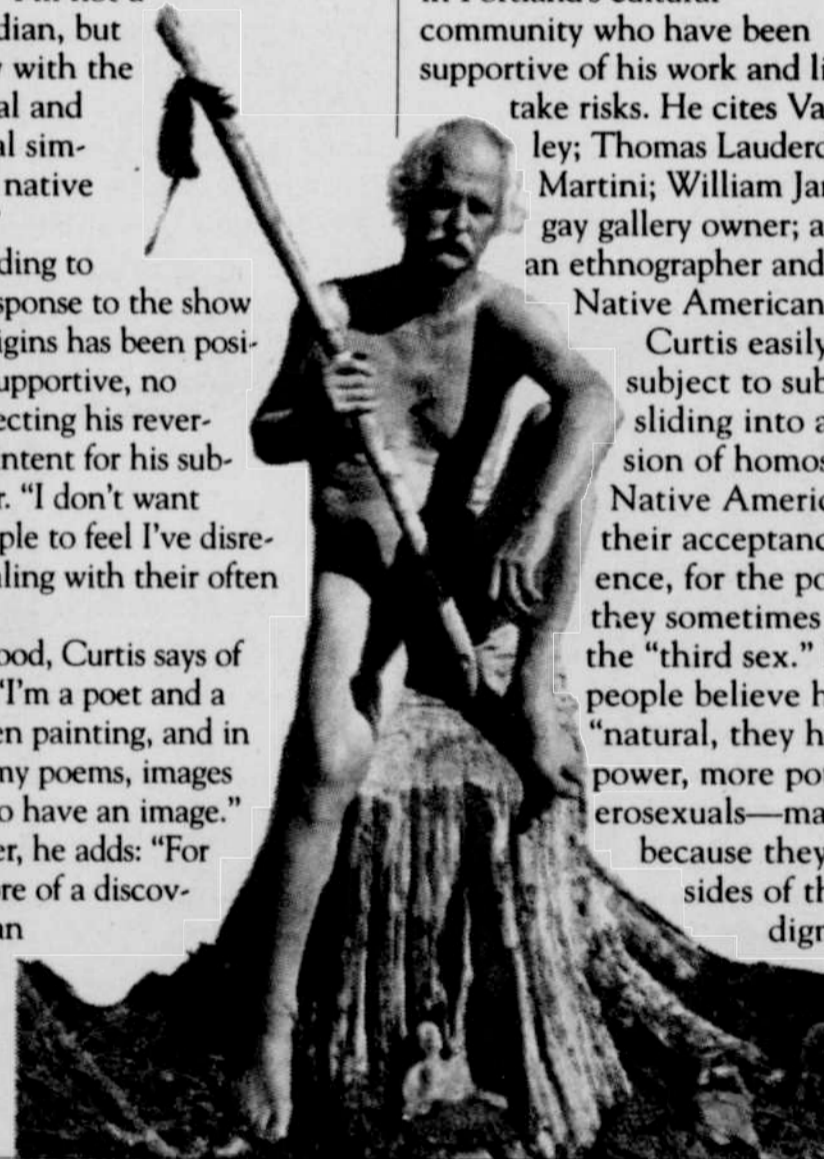


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



"Sun Man"

Calling Portlander Tom Spanbauer one of our most important authors, Curtis reveres *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* for its Native American sensitivity.

On the larger subject of being gay in society today, Curtis has clear opinions. "We gays have to become part of the larger community, too. We have to be somewhat fearless about presenting what we're interested in, but we also have to be gracious and understand where other people are coming

from. I would really feel bad to be in a totally gated gay community someplace myself."

Today, Curtis finds himself at a turning point. Having lived for many years in Oregon City with his mother, who recently passed away, new horizons and options are presenting themselves. He would like to travel more, especially in the Northwest.

As we finish our interview, Curtis' appreciation for the life he has led, and still is leading, is evident. He seems to be in a reflective and grateful mood, surveying where he's been and where he is and eminently aware that before him lies the ultimate empty canvas—his own future.

"This town really loves me, and I love this town. There are such wonderful people in this community, and it's a great privilege and honor to be part of it. I feel humble and grateful that I've been able to do so much work... my life has been a feast."

Given Curtis' past 30 years in Portland and his penchant for living life without boundaries, his next chapter promises to be scintillating. Stay tuned. [J]

Paintings by WALT CURTIS will be on display through July 28 at Mark Woolley Gallery, 120 N.W. Ninth Ave.

**Inspectek  
West, Inc.**

A.S.H.I.  
OAH  
OCHI #060  
CCB #118865

- Full Structural Inspections
- Reinspections
- Roof Inspections • Pest & Dry Rot
- Loans for Conventional, FHA, VA & HUD Financing
- 203K Re-Hab Loans

(503) 307-9180  
www.inspectekwest.com



**bodiesinbalance**  
of portland, inc.

**PILATES** therapeutic exercise

Private & semi private lessons  
Small group mat classes  
Teacher training center

503/248-4483 • 852 SW 21st  
www.bodiesinbalance.citysearch.com

**EASTSIDE  
MOVING & STORAGE Co.**

- Household Goods
- International
- Trade Shows

**Toni. C. Morales**

Director of Corporate Relocation  
E-mail toni@move-northwest.com

(503) 777-4181

(800) 547-4600

Fax (503) 775-8443



**MAYFLOWER  
TRANSIT**

**Without a travel agent,  
you're on your own.**

Plan Now  
for Holiday Travel

- Mexico
- Hawaii
- South Pacific

**LLOYD TRAVEL**

1026 NE Multnomah

503-288-5145

Mon. - Fri. 8:30 am - 5:30 pm

Sat. 10 am - 3 pm