

ART

It's his pleasure Retrospective exhibit by Walt Curtis chronicles a poet's voice in paint

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

The bloom is not yet off the rose that is Walt Curtis. *Mala Noche*, Curtis' novella that became Gus Van Sant's directorial debut, is being published in France. 1970s independent films *Pay Dirt* and *Property*, featuring performances by Curtis, are being released on DVD. And a new show at Portland's Mark Woolley Gallery surveys the gay street poet's painterly side.

"It's sort of a retrospective," says Curtis, 62, who lives in Oregon City. Titled *Poet's Choice*, the exhibit displays mostly figurative mixed-media paintings spanning some 20 years.

Viewing the artwork and listening to Curtis are similar experiences. Both deliver short, sometimes disconnected, yet always relative bursts of ebullient ideas and genuine emotion. Art and artist are so vibrant and explicit that one

can't simply dismiss them. There's intelligence in the raving and clarity in the spontaneity.

Portions echo *Native Spirits*, Curtis' last show with Woolley in 2001; the artist still incorporates various Native American symbols and materials. His canvas for "The Souls of Dead Men Go Into Fish," for example, is a piece of wood reclaimed from the Willamette River.

"Paint soaks into the wood differently than on paper or even canvas," he explains. "It's sort of intriguing what will happen, the accidents in the wood, the knots."

He immediately turns to "Octopus," his new work that represents one's many arms of desire. As Curtis points to knots on the wood's surface, he pulls out of his pocket some glue and a silvery disc he uses to fill an empty space. The discs are train-flattened coins that make perfect hooks for catching viewers.

Poet's Choice is filled with paintings that encompass such found objects. "The Devil's Candle," for instance, incorporates a smashed padlock and a piece of chain. But just as interesting is what lies beneath the surface because Curtis often reworks paintings from places like Goodwill.

"This one was a rather mediocre wine cellar theme," he reveals, indicating an image that shows through the foreground of a white prone body. "But it had this fabulous candle that I knew I had to use. It just hit me—well, the devil's candle is like a penis, or desire, or something that can get you into trouble."

"The Erotic Cowboy" superimposes naked cowboys and Indians on a traditional Western landscape. "There was something about it that I wanted to utilize, so I came up with this cliché of smoke signals coming from the mountains, which are tits," he laughs. "I wanted to do something whimsical but also to take a stereotype and turn it into something else.... That excites me, all this 'under energy' and what am I going to do with this.... I'd hate to sit down with uniform-size canvases painted white."

Indeed, white is rare in Curtis' palette. He's "nutty" about color, especially "primary third-grade color complements." And his paintings are as busy and multidimensional as his conversation.

"Luna Regna" is a wild portrait painted on a collage of 1950s wallpaper scraps in which

elongated figures seem to woo among a shower of flowers. "They give a kind of pattern that the eye can go back to or bounce off," instructs Curtis, turning around to ask somewhat rhetorically: "Is it too busy? Some of these are rather busy, aren't they?"

One critic claims the paintings have so much energy that they make him feel queasy. "I like that happening. I like your eye to go here and then go back there," Curtis retorts. "In these kinds of really busy paintings, your eye jumps around, trying to adjust to the layered dimensions, the patterns and the colors. Sometimes I find I work color like that, too, so that your eye can kind of look for color combinations...almost abstract color patches and then things that bounce off them, making the figures emerge."

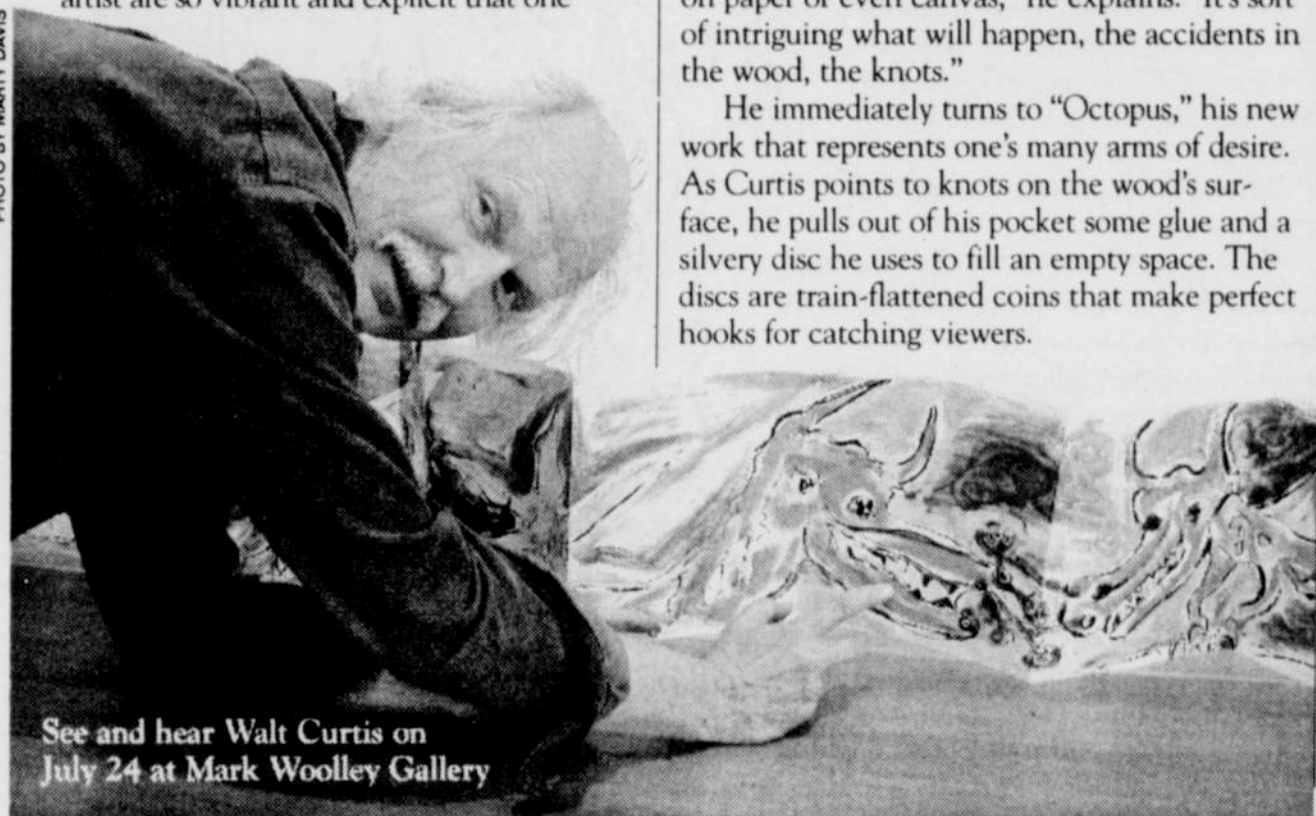
As do words, often enough for this Renaissance man's literary heart to complete several poems roused by a painting's symbolism.

Which leads Curtis to suggest his own raison d'être. "For me, it's the energy of it all. I think there's pleasure in them," he remarks, contemplating his style. "I'm not too big on modern art. It seems to me that art has gone in the direction of presenting ideas or concepts. Well, I think a painting should give you pleasure. It should arouse pleasure and beauty and sensuality. I like art like that." □

WALT CURTIS' *Poet's Choice* is on exhibit through Aug. 2 at Mark Woolley Gallery, 120 N.W. Ninth Ave. #210. He plays host to the lively "Community of Poets" reading 7 p.m. July 24 at the gallery.

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PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



See and hear Walt Curtis on July 24 at Mark Woolley Gallery

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