

# Portrayals in spirituality

*The Franciscan Spiritual Center in Milwaukie hosts the artwork of Street Roots vendor Phoebe Oaks*

**BY HELEN HILL**  
STAFF WRITER

**B**odies etched in light, meticulous landscapes rich with allegory, portraits that seek the essence of a soul. The colored pencil and ink art of Phoebe Oaks is stunning and brave.

Stunning because the color, composition and detail are luminous. Brave because her driving motivation is to use her gift of

expression to help destigmatize spiritual experiences common to marginalized people.

Oaks has been a Street Roots vendor off and on since 2015. She will be serving for the third consecutive year on the editorial committee of Street Roots' zine, an annual fall publication featuring vendor poetry and art. She is also a regular volunteer for Sisters of the Road, a nonprofit café for people experiencing

homelessness and poverty.

Oaks' evocative portrait of former Street Roots vendor Maddy Brown Clark is an excellent example of her ability to thoughtfully craft the essential. Maddy's wise and graceful nature is expressed in the openness of her face while strong music spirals from her fingertips.

Spirals are a recurring theme for Oaks. Of her work "Spiral of Life" she wrote: "The spiral is a common and beautiful pattern in nature. ... Its outer part is much larger than its inner. (As you travel forward) it takes less and less distance to move closer to the center."

Oaks' own spiritual journey deepened through a tragedy she experienced as an undergraduate biology student when a good friend was killed by a drunk driver.

"At the funeral, I felt a flooding sense of peace with impermanence and mortality," she recalled. "The death denial in this culture is another thing I'd like to challenge through my art."

Several of Oaks' works deal viscerally with death and decay. In one piece – not part of her current show because of its potentially disturbing imagery – vultures pull the entrails out of a corpse on the forest floor as a beautifully rendered



Phoebe Oaks is exhibiting her artwork at the Franciscan Spiritual Center in Milwaukie.

PHOTO BY HELEN HILL



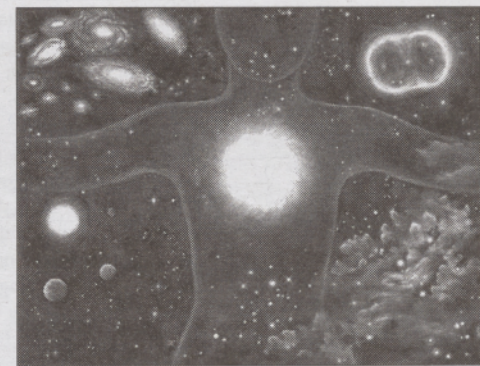
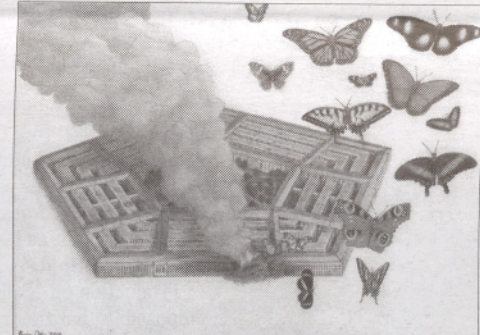
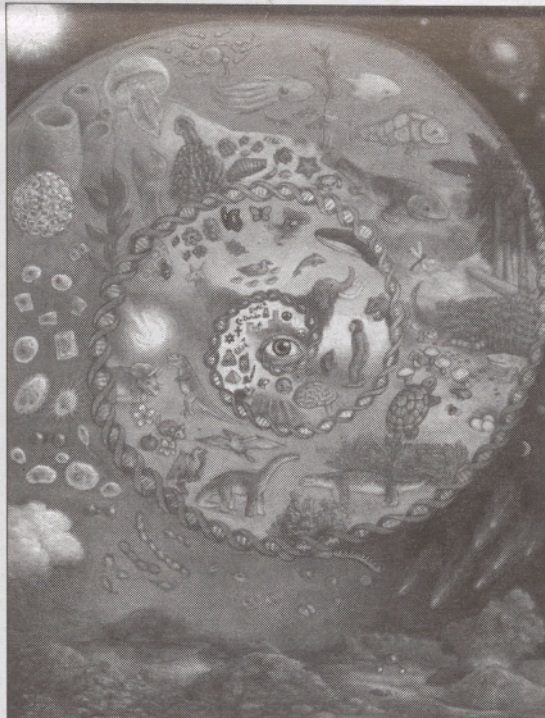
Phoebe Oaks' portrait of Maddy Brown Clark was featured in Street Roots' 2017 fall zine.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Artwork by Phoebe Oaks

**Where:** Franciscan Spiritual Center, 2512 SE Monroe St., Milwaukie

**When:** Open to the public for viewing from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday through September



ILLUSTRATIONS BY PHOEBE OAKS

woodpecker, chickadee and nuthatch look on tranquilly from the branches of surrounding trees.

"Accepting death actually enriches our lives. This acceptance lessens fear, egotism, denial, superficiality, materialism and insensitivity," Oaks wrote in her artist's statement about the piece.

The forest has always been a place of renewal and inspiration for Oaks.

"I got laid off in 2016, and I lived in the woods for three months," she said. She moved from the woods to a women's shelter for the next six and a half months. Now she

has an apartment of her own.

Although she eschews the rampant material culture, Oaks makes it clear that she is not a renunciate. She is living firmly in the real world and working, through her art, to counter trends that silence, minimize and disempower an individual's desire to look past the superficial goals of our society and find a deeper truth.

There is a strong connection, she believes, between those marginalized by poverty and those who undergo spiritual

See ART, page 13