

PAINTING THE GOOD

In an era of vitriolic hyperbole, local artist Simon Graves focuses on the positive

Oil paintings of Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Frida Kahlo and Abraham Lincoln, among others, lined the walls of downtown Eugene's Townshend's Teahouse amidst the chatter of conversation and the clinking of ceramic mugs against tabletops.

These portraits are the work of Simon Graves, a Eugene artist whose current oeuvre is focused on the importance of the constructs of good and evil — and specifically the characters we tend to conceive as being good on an iconic, archetypal level.

Upon meeting Graves, I was unsurprised to find that he is a very upbeat person, and rightfully so, as a lot of positive life events have seemed to domino for him these past few months.

Graves recently came out as gay, and his family and friends offered a tremendous amount of support.

"I've been married for 26 years," Graves says. "My wife has been trying to get me out for the past 10 and my kids have been trying to get me out, too."

He adds, with a laugh: "And when I came out this past December my family said, 'It's about f-ing time.'"

Surprisingly, though, it's not the positive things that inspired Graves to paint these iconic portraits, but the lack thereof.

The idea for this series of paintings arose a few years ago when Graves was having a conversation with a few of his children's college friends who stated that good and evil are wholly subjective ideas, based on one's own morals and beliefs, not ideas that can be static and objective constructs.

The students were in a class about relativism and made the argument, Graves explains, that "good is a construct that humans make. When an animal kills another animal, it's good for the one, but not the other. So, they kind of cancel each other out — it's a subjective thing."

The conversation troubled Graves, who countered that the construct of good is necessary in order for people to be



able to get along in a community. And so the 48-year-old artist turned to his canvas to hash out his thoughts.

"I think that we know what is good; I think that we can make that choice," Graves says. "From the characters that I've painted, we can see the good that they've done."

Graves didn't originally have in mind a list of people he wanted to paint, and in that respect the portrait subjects came to him naturally. "I think that [the subjects] kind of picked themselves in the sense of what they've done in the world," Graves says.

Although he mostly painted portraits of figures who were inspirational to him personally, Graves also asked friends, family members and people at his day job — at Eugene True Value Hardware — who they found to be good influences as well.

"There are some in there that don't necessarily fall into the 'good' pattern per se," Graves says. "I don't really know if Steve Buscemi would be considered that, but my daughter really likes him, so I painted a picture of him, and he used to be a fireman, so there you go," he laughs.

Graves began making art at a young age. He never took any classes, but instead watched his mother paint regularly as a child. He now paints in a small bedroom at home. Graves also wrote and illustrated a children's book — *Sylvan & Perry's Tangle in the Cave* — shown in the Springfield City Hall gallery in 2014. Beyond that, Graves says he's relatively new to the Eugene art scene.

And as for the notion of good and evil being subjective concepts, Graves believes that this strong sense of subjectivism

can isolate people and also cause great cynicism. Overcoming solipsistic views and realizing our inherent similarities to other people — and the overall acceptance that is gained from that — is one of the main goals in this particular collection, Graves says.

"Because of our subjectiveness, we don't realize how much common ground we really have," Graves says. "When people realize how similar we all are, I think we'll be able to get along better." ■

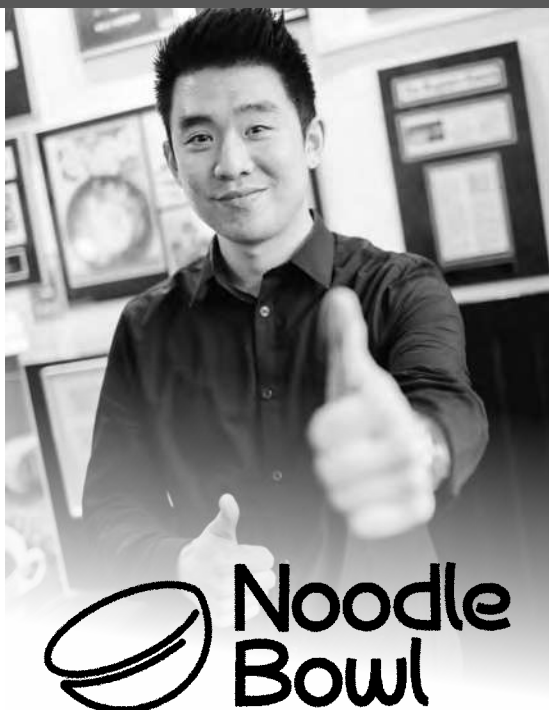
Simon Graves will show his work June 26-28 at The Wayward Lamb; 150 W. Broadway.

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