

CULTURE AND PASSION

Charles Munroe moves on with new show in Springfield

It was a rainy night in Springfield so not a lot of people walked outside during the Second Friday Art Walk. Down the street on the west wall of Emerald Art Center, the Simpsons mural managed the weather as expected. The Matt Groening and 20th Century Fox Film Corporation collaboration was meant to be outside.

Meanwhile, a slow stream of people meandered into the new Main Street restaurant Cheesesteak NW, where Charles Munroe and his wife sat waiting in case anyone on the art walk had any questions.

The owners are friends of friends of Munroe, which is how he came to exhibit here. He is the second artist to show work at the restaurant, whose long, high walls serve well as gallery space.

His exhibit *Culture and Passion* is displayed on two walls, largely organized by subject matter and chronology. The portrait paintings and prints are striking. They are highly realistic, dramatically composed depictions of Native Americans, mostly from the Washoe Tribe of California and Nevada.

Among the portraits is “Dat So La Lee,” taken from a historical photograph of the 19th-century Washoe woman of the same name who worked as a housekeeper and was known for her basket-weaving skills.

Dat So La Lee sometimes spent as much as a year weaving a single basket according to Carson City’s Culture and Tourism Authority. During her lifetime her baskets would sell for \$5,000.

Dat So La Lee’s photograph was originally in black and white. Munroe translated the image to a closely cropped composition, so her head practically fills the format. He also painted in color, giving the portrait a contemporary feel.

Munroe isn’t part of the tribe, so I was curious how he arrived at his subject matter.

The simple answer is, he contacted the tribe.

The more complicated — and complete — response goes back to Munroe’s childhood, when he was first attracted to images of historical Native Americans like Sitting Bull.



MUNROE’S DAT SO LA LEE

As is often the case, the path to subject matter isn’t direct.

Munroe attended commercial art school as a teenager and worked with his father, a sign and silkscreen artist. He went on to work as a graphic artist for a firm in California that produced graphics and production art for large corporations. When he retired, freedom came.

Munroe returned to the subject he was drawn to in youth. He reached out to the Washoe Tribe, who reside in the area close to where he was living. He met Becky Smokey, who directed him to attend a workshop at Lake Tahoe aimed at revitalizing the Washoe language.

Connecting with the tribe’s program, called the Patalji Me?k’i Head Start Immersion Nest, gave his art purpose. He could help bring attention to the effort to revitalize Washoe culture — in particular, language.

Munroe felt honored when the tribe contracted him

to illustrate a children’s book, *The Wasiw Legend of Pewet’sali and Their Adventure With Black Widow*. He was the only non-tribal member to work on the language program’s recently published series, along with Kevin Jones, Mauricio Sandoval and BillyHawk Enos. The series tells stories of tribal legends in Washoe language. It is for sale at the Nevada Museum of Art; proceeds support the Washoe youth language restoration effort.

The oceanic paintings on the left wall of the Springfield show reflect Munroe’s move from California to the Oregon coast. One of the coastal paintings depicts two pelicans and a plover and is inspired from a photograph taken by his wife Maggie, whom he recently married.

What are his plans for subject matter for the future? He isn’t sure yet. He wants to move on. He says, “I am evolving as an artist.” ■

Charles Munroe’s artwork will be at Cheesesteak NW, 521 Main St, Springfield, through Jan. 10. Meet the artist there from 11 am to 3 pm Saturday, Dec. 22.

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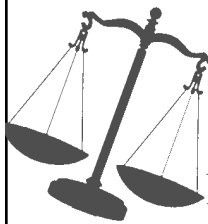


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