



A REFLECTION OF 2020

By KATHERINE LACAZE
For The Astorian

The paintings in Morrison Pierce's latest series, titled "October Surprise," aren't pretty. They're not meant to be.

"I'm not necessarily caring about a picture being pretty, I want it to be emotional," said Pierce, whose work was recently shown at the Astoria Visual Arts Gallery. "If I succeeded, it's an emotional picture versus a pretty picture ... We don't need pretty pictures anymore."

Instead, the figurative abstract art he created during the past few months as the gallery's fall artist in residence is designed to capture the reality of life-altering events that occurred during 2020: the coronavirus pandemic; the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake; and mass civil unrest, including desecrated monuments and burning buildings.

"This is my reflection of 2020," Pierce said. "This year is a monumental year, things will probably not go back to being the same. I just tried to capture as much as I could while it was happening."

He used a couple different phrases to describe the energy and events of 2020: "a lot of unbalance in the force, if you will," and a "paradigm shift."

"It definitely feels like there's something out there that's pushing a direction," he said. "I just kind of caught it with a paintbrush."

Among the nearly two dozen pieces in the series are images of medical workers in full hazmat suits, gas masks galore and a statue of Christopher Columbus with blood trickling down stone. Many of the pieces — which were created using a variety of media, such as charcoal, paint, pencil and an uneven application of epoxy — are at once disturbing and absurd; both silly and serious.

While he uses a touch of satire in his work, Pierce's goal is to tread the fine line between objectivity and depicting his own emotional response to what's happening.

"If you go one way or the other, then you're almost being a propagandist and I've never been a propagandist," he said. "It has its own place in art. And I like that art but I don't make

that kind of art."

Over the past few months, Pierce has also turned to music as an outlet for responding to this year. He started playing with Oscar Nelson in April, when much of the state was shutdown.

"It felt like the thing to do," he said.

Going by the name Strange Places, the duo produced a handful of CDs and music for Spotify and iTunes.

"Just like with anything you make, you have to release it into the wild and let it take care of itself," he said.

Now that Pierce's show at Astoria Visual Arts has closed, he is heading to Miami with some of the work he created for his "October Surprise" series. He also plans to paint a mural and start new projects.

Pierce is an avid traveler, having made a home in numerous places across the country before settling in Astoria three years ago.

"If you like to travel, just travel and find a place where it's comfortable enough to live and be able to paint," he said. "That's why this town was really exciting to me, because it had this Bohemian vibe to it."

While that energy has changed some over the past few years, he still appreciates the artistic movement in Astoria that is fed by the wealth of artists and galleries functioning in the community. There also is a conducive market for his work.

This year, he experienced a fluctuation in the economic support for his art because of the pandemic. The art community also suffered, he believes, because artists were perceived as non-essential — an idea he questions.

"Look all over the world: From the beginning of time, art was made. We are your history-makers," he said. "If there are no pictures painted or no songs made or no books written or anything like that, that year didn't happen ... Art is how you remember what you did, because you connect to it as a society."

Katherine Lacaze is Astoria High School's theater director and the founder of Clatsop Children's Theater Company. She is a frequent contributor for Coast Weekend, The Astorian and Sea-side Signal.



Morrison Pierce October Surprise



Photos by Katherine Lacaze

TOP: Astoria artist Morrison Pierce documented 2020 through a series of striking paintings. **MIDDLE:** Some of Pierce's art. **BOTTOM:** The artist blends the appalling with silliness for a unique take on serious events.