

Art Honors the Ancestors

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"I still had to really learn what it was I was doing," she said. "I didn't even know the word 'marketing,' and I had to become real quick-steady because my art did sell, and then I had to learn about money."

Pitt said much of her successes as an artist also stem from the support of the galleries that have shown her work throughout her career. One such space is the Quintana Gallery located in Downtown Portland.

Founded in 1972 by Cecil and Rose Quintana, the art space is unique in that it is the only gallery that shows contemporary Native American art created exclusively by Native Americans.

"I love being the conduit to artists to show their work and expose their culture to our community," said Cecily Quintana, the director of the gallery and daughter of the founders. "I appreciate how supportive the city of Portland has been to the gallery, and how loyal our clients are in their support of Native-American art."

Quintana said, when an artist's work speaks specifically to a culture, it can often be difficult to find a venue that is the perfect fit for them. "It can be hard to find a gallery because there are few focused specifically to certain cultures."

She said, however, this is what makes the gallery, which has remained open for 40-years, so special.

Pitt agreed.

According to Quintana, "when people hear Lillian is coming to the gallery, they are so excited because they want to know the person behind the work because she is so magical."

Quintana gallery, said Pitt, was one of the first places to show her work, and she remembers when it was just a "little tiny store," at the time of her emergence as a young Indian artist.

"It was such a treat to find them," she said. "I feel very privileged."

Although neither of her parents witnessed the artist she has become today, she said they would be very proud to see how she has celebrated their culture.

After Pitt's father died in 1975 and during her first moments as an artist, her mother resided in a nursing home, where Pitt would bring her self-made mask pens,

which her mother would keep in a drawer in her room.

One day, her mother asked her what she was doing, and Pitt said "I do art."

But Pitt explained, within their traditional Shaptin language, the word for art doesn't exist, so when her mother asked, "What is art?" She responded, "I make pretty things, and people buy them."

Pitt said, "My mother then told me, 'Oh, well you have to do the very best you can.'"

"And that's what I did," she said.

Although Pitt reflects back on her years as an artist with gratitude, after a life-time of creating works that honor her ancestors, she said it is time to give back to the community she currently lives within.

"I'm in the giving back stage," she said.

Pitt said her advice to a young working artist, inspired by her mother, is to do the very best work possible. "No shortcuts," she said. "And don't expect everything to be easy. You know you're an artist when you feel compelled to do art every single day."

Currently, Pitt is working with the Confluence Project and teaching high school and 8th grade students about the indigenous people of the Colombia River. She said she has also been teaching art workshops at Celilo Village near the falls in the Colombia River Gorge.

When The Dalles dam was built in 1957, she said the Army Corps of Engineers moved the village and promised them homes. "But that didn't really happen until two-years-ago," she said.

"When you reach a certain level of success you have to give back to your community," she said. "The village has been lied to and tromped on, so I decided to help them instead of my own reservation, the Confederate Tribes of Warm Springs."

The kids, she said, are so proud to do something of their own. "It was very empowering to the whole village."

Throughout her time as an artist, Pitt has been dedicated to sharing her history and culture of her people for a more peaceful tomorrow and created art, which has shown individuals from all walks of life the beauty behind Native American traditions.

She said, "We have to take care of each other like family."



Cecil Quintana and his daughter Cecily are a major force in their family's business Quintana Gallery, which was founded in 1972 and is the only place in the entire city that shows contemporary art by Native Americans created exclusively by Native Americans.

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