Local Mural Artist Gets First Solo Show

By Melanie Sevcenko

Local African American painter Henry Frison will exhibit close to 20 portraits at the end of the month, in what will be the artist’s first solo show.

Opening on July 29 at greenHAUS Gallery and Boutique, Frison’s intimate portraits of iconic Black figures — President Obama, Rosa Parks and Michael Jackson among them — will be on display until the end of summer.

“I want Henry to feel the respect of the masses, and not because he should have been provided 40 years ago,” said Cole Reed, owner of greenHAUS.

Frison’s exhibit is a part of his solo show, featuring his works that reflect his love for portrait painting. The exhibit also highlights his childhood living on a ranch in his native town of Bellinger, Texas.

Growing up, Frison said he was always sketching — mostly boyhood fascinations like cartoon characters. But as he matured, he discovered his gift for rendering images of people.

“Drawing people was always a challenge to try to capture each person,” Frison told The Skanner. “Everybody is really unique in their own right, but that’s why I love portrait painting.”

As a young man Frison moved to New Mexico, where he lived for 10 years and worked at a cotton compress. In 1965, at the age of 25, he landed in Portland and found work at a steel foundry. After suffering an illness that put him out of work, Frison enrolled in the now-closed Advertising Art School.

It was there that he learned the art of sign painting, which would later inform his large-format skills for murals. He also graduated from sketching with charcoal pencils to painting with oil.

Shortly after completing school, Frison joined the socially conscious Albina Mural Project.

Robin Dunitz is a mural historian who used to present mural tours through the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles. “We tried to educate people how murals were a way to present different cultures and to show the artistic talents of a diversity of people in a city,” said Dunitz, who now resides in Portland.

In a similar spirit, this year marks the 50th anniversary of Chicago’s 1967 “Wall of Respect,” and several mural programs across the nation are acknowledging its influence on community mural movements. Composed by 14 artists, “Wall of Respect” is a montage of portraits depicting close to a dozen Black heroes in various fields such as music, sports and politics.

“Artists of color have historically been excluded from a lot of mainstream galleries and museums,” continued Dunitz. “So the streets became their gallery.”

According to Frison, he was never asked to exhibit his work in Portland’s downtown galleries. One of the reasons, he said, was because his prices were too low. Dunitz and muralist Joanne Oleksiak curated the 2010 exhibit “Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals” for the Oregon Historical Society, which included work from the Albina Mural Project. The exhibit is also reflected in Dunitz’s book of the same name, co-authored by Jim Prigoff.

Some images featured in Frison’s exhibit are acknowledging its influence on community mural movements.

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Some images featured