

Visually interpreted literature

Wednesday, 9 November 2016 | Written by Claire Colby

A serendipitously timely collection gives its final show at the Wilsonville Library



SPOKESMAN PHOTO: CLAIRE COLBY
Of the 20-piece collection, painter Lisa Wiser chose Alexander Upshaw (top, center) as her subject for an acrylic portrait, depicting the split nature of his Native heritage and his Anglo-American raising.

For Wilsonville Public Library patrons and frequenters, the Artist of the Month collections lining a wall near the entrance have become a welcome staple.

This month, visitors will be greeted with the 2016 Lake Oswego Reads traveling art show, exhibiting artists' interpretations of the book "Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher" and its cast of characters. As the show's final stop, the library is offering art-lovers in the region their last chance to view the collection before the pieces are taken to private collections.

Although a coincidence, the book chosen for the 2016 LO Reads holds special cultural relevance concerning the current protests in Standing Rock, North Dakota. Selected by the Steering Committee — consisting of a volunteer group of retired or current literary professionals — Timothy Egan's biographical western novel "Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis," follows the life of mountaineer, explorer, photojournalist and amateur anthropologist, Edward Curtis. The narrative starts during the summer of 1900 when Curtis decided to give up his photography career to pursue photographing each of the fading Native American communities throughout North America. Spanning more than a decade, Curtis' passionate mission was accomplished but at the cost of his friends and financial security, and he died poor and alone.

Now in its 10th year, LO Reads drew 20 local artists to read the biography and create one-of-a-kind pieces inspired by the book. Lake Oswego resident and veteran painter Lisa Wiser is now in her sixth year participating as a contributing artist.

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“The portrait that I chose to do was a real challenge,” Wiser said. The figure that she chose a Native American man who had been sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, more commonly referred to as the Carlisle School. The boarding school, founded on the principle that Native culture was inferior, indoctrinated Native children with Euro-American educations and culture in an attempt to strip away the children’s Native heritage and identities. Wiser’s portrait depicts Alexander Upshaw divided down the middle, half with his Native identity and apparel and half with his Anglo-American identity and apparel.

Despite being primarily a landscape painter, Wiser says that she enjoys the challenge of translating literature into visual works.

“My involvement has been really interesting because when you read a book and know that you’re going to be making a piece, you pay more attention,” Wiser says. “We all did try to honor the essence of the book.”

The 20-piece exhibit is composed of prints, collage, paintings and drawings, all birthed out of each artist’s interpretation and vision of the book. Wiser says that most artists like having that kind of creative freedom while still having a concept to work off of and that some who have personal relationships with themes explore those roots. For Wiser, she lets the inspiration for her pieces come to her organically as she reads.

“As I read the chapter on this individual, I knew that I was going to do something on him,” Wiser says. “When I read these books, I usually have one image that sticks with me over the course of reading this book.”

It was when she was reading the chapter covering Upshaw’s untimely death after being imprisoned for defending his tribe when they were attacked that the desire to paint his portrait solidified.

“This is kind of a reflection of the plight of the Indians in this country today,” Wiser says. “It will make an impact when people view this show. I think that people have a little bit more compassion for the Native population because of North Dakota.”

Although the subject matter of the collection is heavy, Wiser says that she — and the other contributing artists — truly enjoys being an ongoing part of the program and looks forward to completing another piece for the 2017 collection, based on “Rise of the Rocket Girls.”

“I’m halfway through the book already and I already have my image in my brain,” Wiser says.

But before she fully moves on to her 2017 LO Reads piece, she hopes that in the 2016 collection’s final showing people will enjoy each piece and be mindful of their combined meaning.

“Come with an open mind and appreciate what the Native populations have gone through to exist,” Wiser says, “and contemplate why we keep challenging them and trying to take things away from them.”