What COVID shuts down Art opens up

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Artist Shannon Gurley O'Donnell talks 'Native Beauty'

Watercolor can be a difficult medium for some artists to grasp because of the necessary attention to detail and technique. But one artist working with Gallup Arts is rising to the challenge.

Gallup Arts Executive Director Rose Eason hosted a virtual artist talk with Shannon Gurley O'Donnell Oct. 13 about the newly opened *Native Beauty* exhibit being hosted at the ART123 gallery through Nov. 7.

WHERE IDEAS COME FROM

O'Donnell, from Gallup, but now living in Phoenix, discussed the exhibit, which is about the generations of people who have called the Gallup region home, and the artwork and visual culture that has become synonymous with Gallup.

"Just painting local Native Americans, I thought it would be a great idea," O'Donnell said. "I started looking through reference photos to see where I could start."

She said she has always loved the Navajo hair bun, which is reflected in one of her watercolor paintings shown during the talk.

"A lot of times I would see the traditional outfits like in the [Gallup] Ceremonial growing up. A lot of the outfits were red, which is why I included a red outfit in this painting," O'Donnell said, indicating one of her works on display.

The artistry that Navajo people have demonstrated can be seen on a daily basis, which is something O'Donnell admires.

“They wear art,” she said.

A NEW KIND OF ART

Painting Native garb and designs is something new for O’Donnell, she said.

“I wanted to do this before, but I get kind of intimidated to go down different lines [of art],” O’Donnell said. “I think ‘what if I don’t get it right?’ That comes up with every painting. But then I think to just go for it. If it doesn’t work, you can just toss it out.”

This is a process she goes through for each piece.

O’Donnell discussed another painting featuring a pair o moccasins and a black skirt with color patterns, which she called *Sacred Dance*.

“I have always thought Zuni moccasins were so cool because of the way they wrap from near the waist down,” she said. “Then as I was painting the moccasins and then the skirt in the painting, I thought I wanted to see one in person. I wanted to feel the texture of it, I wanted to see what it feels like and what the materials are, to see how they can make it so colorful and vibrant.

“Everything is so intentional [in the design],” she continued. “I know there’s a lot of meaning and symbolism within the culture on these designs. I can’t speak to that, but I know it is all intentional, and that also caught my eye.”

Eason commented on the medium and how it can reflect the subject.

“Watercolor is a difficult medium because it requires an attention to detail and discipline, such as the wrapping of the moccasins or the patterns on the skirt,” Eason said.

O’Donnell agreed that the use of watercolor is intentional, much like the artwork she admired. She also discussed her methods of preserving the whites in her paintings, which Eason said can be difficult for some artists.

“I tend to be what some people call a watercolor purist,” O’Donnell said. “Some people use an opaque white, but I preserve my whites by not painting on that section [of the canvas] or I use a resist, which is almost like rubber cement, on all the areas I don’t want paint to go on.”

Once an area is painted over, you will lose the pristine quality of the whites on the canvas, O’Donnell said. But this technique can be used to create some vibrant color contrasts.

GROWING APPRECIATION

O’Donnell brought up a spiritual side to each painting she makes, in that she hopes to channel the energy of the subject she is painting.

“I always ask before I paint that whomever or whatever I paint to come through me,” O’Donnell said. “And I almost feel things, I can’t really explain it. Like, I feel the material of the moccasins. I asked to be guided by whatever spirit, energy, I don’t care what people call it. There’s a oneness there.”

This idea was reflected in a third piece O’Donnell shared, which depicts a young girl in a traditional jingle dancer dress that O’Donnell saw in a photo of the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial in 2019.

She talked about how she was enamored by the girl’s regalia in the photo, and in painting it she was able to see and appreciate it in ways she may not have in the past.

“It was fun to capture those details, because in painting them I’m forced to notice them. Because I can’t paint them unless I notice them,” she said.

The idea of being able to feel the material of the clothing and hear the jingling of the bells as it was painted carried over to a fourth painting O’Donnell shared, which was of a white buffalo dancer [see cover] from a previous Ceremonial.

“I had to think it through from the start, like ‘how am I going to do this?’” she said. “As you paint for years, you constantly perfect your techniques. Having watched many Ceremonials and just hearing the dancers, I’ve seen them enough to realize I was able to capture that feeling.”

ART123 is open by appointment Tuesday through Saturday from 1 pm - 5 pm each day. Call (505) 488-2136 to schedule.

To see more of Shannon Gurley O’Donnell’s work, visit her Instagram account at https://www.instagram.com/paintings_by_shannon/

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