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Friday, 11 December 2015 11:24





Levon Loncassion, born in Gallup, but raised in Zuni began tapping his creative side when his school's third grade program introduced the "Enrichment Program," which provided students the necessary tools to provoke the inner artist in them.

During this time of his young life, Locassion, 36, talked about how as an youngster he would find artifacts such as pottery shards, pieces of arrowheads, or how he would come across huge panels of interesting cliff art within the mesas. He said that in the back of his mind, he was already inspired and creatively influenced by the time he took part in the school's "Enrichment Program," but that was just the beginning.

After he graduated from the University of New Mexico in 2005, his heart was set in becoming a member of the Zuni Hot Shot crew, which he explained took a lot of hard work and dedication. He says the downside of fighting fire during the summer is that all the major Native American art markets occur during the period of time when fire season begins.

Last year, he said he had to choose between fighting fires in California or setting up a booth at Santa Fe Indian Market. He said, he thought to himself, "California's burning and people's houses are burning up versus I wanted to be self-absorbent and go sell my stuff in Sante Fe."

He said he was trying not to let himself down as an artist, and this is how he always feels like he has to switch gears.

“I always knew from the very beginning that I was an artist and it just so happened that I was Native American,” Loncassion said.

Sun: What kind of impact do you think your artwork holds in this generation?

Loncassion: What I usually get from my work is that it is odd or misplaced but there are cultural references that kind of speak to people who understand what it means or if they recognize where it is from. It creates a dialogue. I know that the piece that I brought to be photographed, I wouldn’t say it created a lot of controversy, but it brought a lot of questions and topics about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I think, overall, it was how I was trying to make sense of it, and cope with it because my brother is in the military. He was overseas at the time, and every time we’d turn on the television, something terrible was happening. It was a really a difficult and trying time for my whole family.

Sun: Who do you look up to as an artist?

Loncassion: First and foremost, it is the people in my immediate community. Also, I had a really cool mentor and who was also my godfather. But, unfortunately he had passed from diabetes about four years ago. Ever since then, there is this weird void.

Sun: Do you think being an artist is a Native American thing or western practice?

Loncassion: I have always been asked ‘are you an artist?’ … just because I am a Native American. So, people already automatically assume. I mean, from the very beginning, we

naturally had to be artists, to create stuff, because we didn't go to the store and go buy a deer to make a buck skin. We had to go out and be artistic and create. I mean, there is that lineage.

Honestly, Native American artists, in this region, are captive. They are a captive market to be exploited by, usually what I find, by non-Natives. Everything is either owned by non-Natives, Anglos, or Arabs. Throughout the years, because my parents have been jewelers for about 30 years, and to see them struggle, or get ripped off, it makes me feel like there has to be some other way.

If someone actually sat down and kind of, thought about it. A lot of the really good artists from Sante Fe and Albuquerque, are from this region. It would make sense, to make it more convenient for the artists to have the art buyers come to them instead of the artist going to them.

Sun: Speaking of artwork, do you have any pieces of artwork created by you that you do not plan on selling?

Loncassion: Yes and no. It is usually by circumstance. If it is something that I made a really long time ago that has some sort of sentimental value, and for some odd reason, nobody is drawn to it, or it doesn't sell, and eventually I'm just lugging it along with all my stuff, and I find it, and put it up on my wall, and next thing you know, it means something else.

It helps me remember a part of myself or my creative thinking at that time. So, it kind of comes as a touchstone or stepping stone. But the one thing that the images of the paintings that I create that have sold, and I haven't seen for years, and I come back to it, I am always blown away by where I was at creatively.

Sun: What are your views towards Native American art now versus 10 years, 20 years, or 30 years ago?

Loncassion: It is mixed because I could definitely go both ways because I appreciate the hardcore traditional, let's say, Navajo blanket. I would appreciate that but at the same time, if I

were to be at the same show, and I'd see more of the same technique that has more of a contemporary flair, I think I am more drawn.

It takes a little bit more than just having the skill but then what makes it interesting, creative and enjoyable, is if you have even just a little twist to make it more, I guess the big fancy word, is contemplative.

Sun: What are your goals as an artist for 2016?

Loncassion: Well, I have just been trying to break into the art world and I think that right after I graduated from UNM I wasn't necessary wanting to do it full-force because I wanted to do all these other things. So, for next 2016 art season for me, is to make it into one of the major shows, aside from a few that are out-of-state.

Sun: Any advice to aspiring artists?

Loncassion: Follow your heart. Follow your dreams because nobody can tell you what you can and cannot do, in terms of an artist. Only you can decide whether or not you should be an artist or not. Don't give up, because it has been a struggle for me. I do it for myself and I know that it is always going to be there, and I am going to do it whether I like it or not, so it's not like my end game is wanting to be famous or rich, it's just something that I know that has to happen in terms of being okay with my life or who I am.

Loncassion's more recent accomplishment is being a part of a three-year long project called the "Zuni Map Art Project," which is affiliated with the Ashiwi Awan Museum and Heritage Center located in Zuni, and made to represent place names that are culturally specific to the Zuni people. It includes over 40 pieces of map art paintings by 10 individual artists from the Zuni community.

He is scheduled to perform a live painting at Gallup's ArtsCrawl, starting at 6 pm on Dec.12. Gallup's ArtsCrawl is a community event that is scheduled every second Saturday of every month.