

EDITOR'S PICK

TOP STORY

'Imaging the Sacred': Missoula Art Museum shares creators' spiritual notions

SIERRA CISTONE for the Missoulian

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April Werle, "Wala na Gipintalan/No Longer Painted" (2022, acrylic on panel)

Courtesy the artist

SIERRA CISTONE for the Missoulian

One of the Missoula Art Museum's newest exhibits is called "Imaging the Sacred" and it features the work of four women based mostly out of western Montana — Birdie Hall, Talia Roberts, Daphne Sweet and April Werle.

The exhibit centers around the exploration of spirituality and how it can be represented through visual art. Yet even under this universal theme, each artist's work is strikingly unique and carries its own ideas about what spirituality means to the artist.

Brandon Reintjes, senior curator for the museum, said that the artists had a strong influence in helping him figure out what the show would be about. Once the title was settled on, each artist began creating work that would be specific for the show.



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"You have to pick the right artists," Reintjes said. "But you also have to trust the artists that they are going to ... have the ability and competency to fit the theme. So that's something that MAM really prides itself on — picking artists and trusting artists."

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Werle said before creating work for the show, she started by thinking about stories that were both personal and based on larger spiritual themes. Werle has been learning her native language, Cebuano, and worked with her language tutor to craft a story in the language. Once Werle had finished creating and recording the audio for the stories, she began to paint.

Werle's work now contains a multimedia component where museum-goers can scan a QR code and be directed to the audio recordings of her speaking the stories behind the paintings.

"I really appreciated that the story was represented so completely," Reintjes said. "It's not only visually you're immersed in it, you can go as deep as you want to go as an audience member. So that was a really important connection."

Each artist's work is similar in that it is an expression of a personal journey and relationship to spirituality and nature.

Hall's work explores the history of Christianity as inspired by her own journey into religion, according to Reintjes. Hall's pieces are delicate creations that combine imagery from both nature and classical religious archetypes.

Sweet's work also pulls heavily from nature and centers on women, bodies, self-perception and empowerment, according to Reintjes. Sweet, who is now based in Denver, uses both pencil and paint to create bright and detailed imagery.

“She gets such a lot of mileage out of a single colored pencil,” said Reintjes. “I think to make a drawing feel so complete and so considered with just a single tool is really an incredible feat.”

The fourth featured artist, Talia Roberts, created work that draws a clear and tangible connection between people and nature. Before beginning to paint, Roberts spent three months creating her own paints she made from river rocks that she ground herself and mixed with plant-based oils like linseed and walnut oil.

The result is seven earth-toned pieces that each depict a single circle. The circle was inspired from the countless hours Roberts spent grinding stones in her mortar and pestle.

“It’s a very simple shape,” Roberts said. “And so I sort of think it gives people the ability to reach into their own meditative state or mind. I didn’t want to totally direct so much of an idea, but share more subtle beauty.”

As a whole, the exhibition unites four very different women artists and has been warmly received by the public. Reintjes said the work has moved people to tears and been successful in showcasing the breadth of creativity in the community.

“This was an exhibition that I was really interested in seeing and I didn’t know if the public was going to be interested in it in the same way,” Reintjes said. “And that’s been really encouraging to see people respond so strongly and positively. And it’s really made a strong connection to the audience.”

Sierra Cistone is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Missoula.

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"Imaging the Sacred" is on view at the Missoula Art Museum through Feb. 18.

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