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Paintings in a narrative art exhibit at the Chehalem Cultural Center tell stories that “provide insight into the human condition,” says curator Jen Brown

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The poet Muriel Rukeyser famously said, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” If that’s true, then artists are every bit as essential as scientists to unraveling who we are. Narrative painting comes as close as any medium to being the quintessence of visual storytelling. After all, the earliest art — cave paintings dating back tens of thousands of years — tells the story of the hunt.

Narrative art is the focus of a show that runs through April 2 at the [Chehalem Cultural Center](#) in Newberg. [Understanding Ourselves: Narrative Paintings Curated by Jen Brown](#) features work by Brown and 10 other Oregon artists that goes beyond portraiture and seeks to tell (or at least suggest, or provide a moment from) a story. In notes that accompany each image, the artist tells the story and/or the thought processes behind the creative act that resulted in the image.

It’s a genre [Brown](#) has long been interested in. A few years ago, she started an informal salon in her home to talk shop with other Portland artists. “We discuss all aspects of art and what it takes to be an artist, provide professional development for one another, and knock back a bit of wine in the process,” she said. “Friendships have been formed, exhibitions mounted, and we’ve built a support system for each other. It’s been a really positive experience.”

In 2019, she and salon participant [Chris Pothier](#), who has work in the Chehalem show, noticed that [@narrativepainting](#) on Instagram was available. “I claimed it and ran with it,” Brown said. The artwork featured — ranging from the 15th century to last year — may also be found on a [website](#) she created.



Jen Brown created “An Allegory of Facebook” (oil on canvas, 36 by 54 inches, 2017) after Donald Trump’s inauguration.

“Chris and I have talked a lot about how there is a narrative streak that runs through the work of the artists in the salon,” Brown said, “and a growing movement of representational art in the art world at large. It feels like audiences are craving art that speaks to them, that connects to their own lives. I know many artists who are rejecting conceptual art — as one artist friend calls it, ‘plywood and duct tape art.’”

In just a couple of years, Brown has discussed literally hundreds of paintings on the site. A fair amount of it is pretty grim — Titian’s *The Rape of Europa*, Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat*. Not only is the site a good place to geek out over art history, but it also nicely compliments the show in Newberg.

Narrative painting, Brown said, has been making a comeback in the past decade or so, as artists seek to weave narratives into their images, using ancient myths and stories from folklore or “inventing altogether new tales.”

She expands on the exhibition’s themes in the show’s notes: “We need stories in our lives to help us understand who we are; stories can give us a window into our own psyches, help us understand our relationships with others, and how we fit into society at large. Stories help us find meaning in the uncertainty and instability of our time. The narrative paintings of these PNW artists provide insight into the human condition.”

Other artists whose work is featured in *Understanding Ourselves* include Caitlynn Abdow, Tanmaya Bingham, Austin Eddy, Gregory Hergert, Mari Housley, Aron Johnston, Joshua Langstaff, Elliott Wall, and Tammy Jo Wilson. All the pieces, some of them quite large, are available for purchase.

The stories “narrated” in *Understanding Ourselves* are wildly diverse and in many cases seem elusive or open to interpretation. Interestingly, Brown’s work seems the most concrete in depicting a physical moment in a narrative — the chaotic violence of a barroom brawl, splayed out on a billiards table. The title says it all: *An Allegory of Facebook*. She painted the scene after Trump’s inauguration in 2017.



Artist Joshua Langstaff says “*An Evening in Bruges*” (oil on linen panel, 24 by 20 inches, 2017) began as a study in loneliness, but it soon developed a story of its own. The young woman is not engaging with the viewer seated across from her. Why?



“*Indifference*,” by Aron Johnston (oil on linen panel, 48 by 36 inches, 2018), was inspired by the 2017 fire set by teens that burned 50,000 acres in the Columbia River Gorge.

the accompanying text. “Even seemingly benign posts about cats would contain inflammatory comments about politics. Friends and family members would insult one another on Facebook. Our online behavior is markedly different from how we treat one another in person. Imagine if we carried our online personas over into the real world.”

Other pieces blur the distinction between portraiture and narrative, none so much as Langstaff’s *Evening in Bruges*, which depicts a young woman seated alone at a sidewalk cafe table at dusk. Looking at it, I was reminded of how people talk about the “mystery” of the *Mona Lisa* and what that smile “means.” The figure in Langstaff’s piece is clearly not posing, and she’s not even smiling. One hand grips a glass of ale reflecting the squares from the tabletop’s engraved chessboard. She appears to be looking “off-screen,” but at what? Her expression is unremarkable, but it is also pregnant with meaning; it suggests interiority. There’s a story here, her story, but it’s one we really cannot know.

One could go and on, with each painting. There are 20 in all, and stylistically and topically, they differ wildly. In one, not only is the story clear, but also the inspiration — the Eagle Creek Fire that burned 50,000 acres in the Columbia Gorge in late 2017 after teenagers lit firecrackers in the forest. In Aron Johnson’s *Indifference*, a gasoline can takes the place of firecrackers, but the meaning is the same. The title describes the expression on the face of the boy who meanders off from the blaze he’s started, while a fox in the background runs in terror.









Several pieces veer into surrealism, like two by Greg Hergert in which birds are the main character. *Hit the Road* is an oil painting that casts a crow as a railroad hobo, complete with a bindle slung over its shoulder; *Devil’s Violin*, a pencil crayon on paper, riffs off the title of the 2013 film about the life of violinist Niccolò Paganini, which (the artist explains in the notes) “inspired the idea of a hummingbird needing to play at a level of excellence that would prevent an audience of cats from pouncing on their prey.”

Still others are heavy on symbolism or draw from literary sources. Caitlynn Abdo draws from Norse mythology and depicts the goddess Frigg in a painting of that title. Tammy Jo Wilson’s *She Became the Seed* is inspired by the children’s book *The Giving Tree*. Elliott Wall’s floor-to-ceiling *Bliss Belay or Becoming Pure* depicts the Heron Sisters from the Siberian-Tunguska folktale, one of whom is shielding herself from the glare of the 1980 Tunguska comet that flattened 80 million trees of Russian forest.

The Chehalem Center, as of this writing, is still on limited hours and the exhibit (along with video of the Zoom artists’ reception) can be viewed [online](#) but it really must be seen in person.



Artist Greg Hergert says of “Hit the Road” (oil on panel, 14 by 11 inches, 2020), “In the midst of working hard to survive the rigors of modern life, it is not uncommon to imagine the fantasy of just leaving it all behind and hitting the road in search of fun and adventure.”

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