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MEA CULPA – Victims – Witnesses - Survivors

“An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times.”
Nina Simone

“What good is art? What use is art? What does it do? Is what it does actually worth doing? Art should make us feel more clearly and more intelligently. It should give us coherent sensations, which otherwise we would not have had. If art can’t tell us about the world we live in then I don’t believe there is much point in having it.”
Robert Hughes

For me the essence of art is the exploration of fundamental issues of our time. This exhibit is about our shared moral imperatives and our response to violence and intolerance. MEA CULPA is a church-like interior installation featuring my large-scale paintings. It is intended to be a space for subjective interpretation and reflection within a public yet sacred setting. It is an exploration of how curated space can facilitate personal and shared experience and encourage social action.

There is power in Gothic, Byzantine and Renaissance altarpieces, icons and art. Grand churches have a materiality and influence that surpasses mere brick and mortar. The stained glass, paintings, iconography, precious metals, incense, candles, soaring architecture and memories are all meaningful but when combined they exude a transcendent energy which I hope to tap within this installation.

In this space, I want you to emotionally respond, to experience the reality, to create your own narrative and then to ask important questions. This means tackling the human condition with its suffering, conflict, violence, discrimination, exploitation, intolerance, indifference and addiction as well as its dignity, redemption, perseverance, resilience, forgiveness and love. It means protecting our environment. And it means resisting efforts to undermine our basic human rights.

Throughout all of this is my quest for essential reality- an unquestionable presence and actuality of the viewer’s making that exceeds mere paint and illusion. Something causes you to experience this in a way that goes beyond simply observing an image. The power of objects, non-linear emotional experiences, traces of the past and mental images along with the visual cues I create contribute to your reality. And in the end, I must believe that a painting can cause you to act.
MEA CULPA can be configured for a wide range of venues. There are several size options for varying height, width and depth. The optimum space should have, as a minimum, a 20-ft. ceiling with a width of 20 - 25 ft. and a depth of 25 – 30 ft. However, it can be scaled to fit a smaller chapel-like room. My preferred installation includes eight to twelve church benches and an ornate front altar.

The side wall paintings can be hung on moveable or stationary walls or alternately suspended from the ceiling to enclose a larger space and thus create a nave with outer aisles.
Anastasia 1  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas

No More Words #7  48x36 inch acrylic on canvas
Laine 13  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas

Britain 1  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas
Laine 8  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas

Britain 9  48x36 inch acrylic on canvas
No More Words #6  48x36 inch acrylic on canvas

Emma 1  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas
Laine 12  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas

Myria 1  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas
Thea 4  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas

No More Words #3  48x36 inch acrylic on canvas
No More Words #5  48x36 inch acrylic on canvas

Willie 8  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas
Willie 5  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas

Priscila 15  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas
Willie 3  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas

Britain 6  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas
Destiny 15  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas

Zoe 1  80x60 inch acrylic on canvas
Jacqueline 1  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas

Jacqueline 6  48x36 inch acrylic on canvas
Priscila 14  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas

Jacqueline 2  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas
Laine 5  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas

Rheanna 2  60x44 inch acrylic on canvas
Proof of Concept

This installation was first assembled in a warehouse operated by the Boulder Creative Collective. The ceiling height was only 16 feet rather than my preferred 20. As a result, we were not able to create the front altar space as now envisioned.

The exhibit did however provide experience and a proof of concept for the various arrangements and actual installation concepts and procedures.

My preferred installation includes eight to twelve church benches and an ornate front altar.

The following images are of this warehouse space during and after the installation.

The seven-foot side wall paintings are suspended from the ceiling. In each case two paintings are hung back-to-back creating a more intimate nave space with an aisle/walkway outside of the nave.
Boulder artist William Stoehr's exhibit takes in 'Victims Witnesses Survivors'

Painter's 'activist artist' approach can elicit a powerful response

By Christy Fantz

It was a chill that wouldn't shake.

Perhaps it was aggravated by a lingering burden resting upon much of America on Inauguration Day. Or maybe it was the biting 34-degree Boulder evening that whirred outside of the Boulder Creative Collective warehouse as various art lovers shuffled in and out.

But what really triggered that chill came from behind that yellow door, inside that warehouse in east Boulder. It was sparked by my inner victim, witness and survivor. It was the power of Boulder artist William Stoehr's artwork.

Inside Unit 10, a couple dozen paintings — some rivaling the dimensions of a king-size bed — stared back with anxiousness, worry and unease. Elusive eyes looked on from every angle. Exaggerated hands covered concerned lips. Daring, aggressive brushstrokes highlighted monochrome texture. Bold and inconsistent lines, drips and smears dashed the portraits. And that chill proved to be an empowering one that came from within this once-tattered-being-turned-strong-soul.

The Boulder Creative Collective, 2500 47th St., Unit 10, which opened its new space behind that yellow door last April (the former home of 303 Vodka) is hosting Stoehr's exhibit, "Victims Witnesses Survivors" through Friday, March 3. The closing date will feature a free public closing party from 6-9 p.m. and Stoehr will host a lecture on Thursday, Feb. 2, at 6:30 p.m., discussing his process and his art activism.

Stoehr, a towering, statuesque and very warm man, said he has been painting for 12 years and has always been is intrigued by strong women. "I've always always been interested in women's issues," Stoehr said. "I think I've had a pretty strong empathy that comes through in the paintings. The whole notion of the title of this show is ... about people in the world who have gone through and survived hardships and are strong because of it."
He's always aspired to be an "activist artist," with his artist's statement that reads: "In this space I want you to emotionally respond, to experience the reality, to create your own narrative and then to ask important questions."

His work — which he says explores "intolerance, discrimination, addiction and violence with its victims, witnesses and survivors" — is meant to be finished in the viewer's mind, in the vein of the abstract Cubist movement.

"Throughout all of this is my quest for essential reality," his statement reads, "an unquestionable presence and actuality of the viewer’s making that exceeds mere paint and illusion. Something causes you to experience this in a way that goes beyond simply observing an image."

Take his piece "No More Word #3," for instance. The woman in the acrylic-on-canvas seems troubled. But through her glossy, melancholic eyes, one Syrian woman caught a glimmer of hope, said Stoehr.

Stoehr said a high percentage of his more than 285,000 Facebook followers are from the Middle East, and Central and South America. He said a woman from Syria wrote to him after she saw this particular painting, thanking him for understanding of her troubles. Stoehr said that after she looked at his paintings on Facebook, she wrote, "You saved my life. I was ready to die last night. I got up the next morning and I looked at it and I saw hope in her eyes and said, well then maybe I can have hope."

"As an artist, that’s about the strongest statement," he said. "This is what I want to do as an artist. When I think about it, I’m getting the chills right now. But that’s a true story. People tell me they break down crying in front of the work because they feel such a strong sense. "I painted this to give you an experience and then you complete the painting with your own narrative."

Whether that narrative comes with a ceaseless chill or a new outlook on life, one thing is for sure — Stoehr’s work with victims, witnesses and survivors leaves quite an impact.
WILLIAM STOEHR
FACE PAINTER

Opening The Windows: A Look into The Creative Mind of World-Renowned Artist, William Stoehr
By Kaylyn Aznavarian
According to William Shakespeare, "The eyes are the window to your soul." We see things, feel things, and experience things in a variety of ways, forever making human interaction with one another and the world an incredibly fascinating subject. To some, the work of world-renowned artist William Stoehr is simply a series of faces or people, but to the hundreds of thousands of individuals who view his paintings as a brilliant work of art, his work is so much more than just paint upon a canvas.

It is this idea of human interpretation that fuels Stoehr to create his masterpieces. Stoehr tells us, "My art starts with the recognition that I lose control of the painting the minute I quit working on it and it is seen, experienced and interpreted by others. I want to probe and unleash subjective emotions spanning a lifetime of experiences. I want you to have new and different experiences, over time; each time you re-create my portraits with your own mental image, narrative, and emotions." For some, paintings of his such as "Thea 3" could inflict feelings of sorrow or pain, as though tears are welling up in the dark eyes of such a fair face. For others, the image could be interpreted as haunting, as though she's gone, looking into the depths of your soul. From Stoehr’s perspective, the role of an artist is to more or less allow the viewers an opportunity to question themselves, rather than serve his own ideas to an audience hungry for understanding.

As for what we do understand regarding William Stoehr, it's that he's a man who has followed his childhood dreams to success. From the age of 16, William Stoehr has had a strong passion for art, and dreamt of turning this passion into a career as an artist. However, this dream was put on hold for a while - 40 years, to be exact - but one day he had his wake-up-call, saying, "...I decided I had plenty of life to do what I wanted to do when I was in high school, so I resigned from the best job I ever had to become an artist." It took some practice to get back into the swing of things, but according to Stoehr, he managed to find his artistic voice and now feels as though he's doing what he was meant to do.

For the last decade now, William Stoehr has been turning out massive creations using a very limited palette of acrylic paint. His artistic process is different from what many of us are taught in any Art 101 class in high school or college. According to Stoehr, he begins by pouring a mixture of metallic paints directly on the canvas, and then following it up by pouring, dripping, splattering, and brushing watered-down acrylic paint on the surface. He purposefully varies the coverage of paint, moving the canvas around and utilizing tools such as kitchen sponges, paper towels, brushes, a silkscreen squeegee, and sandpaper to create works of art that are both unique and eye-catching. His paintings take anywhere from 20 to 60 hours to
complete, and frequently are layers upon layers of what many artists may call mistakes or re-do's in their own work. His reason? "Many of my paintings tend to be layers of fresh starts. I believe I may have a finished painting one day after maybe 20 hours, but soon I brush, flow, or spill paint all over the surface, leaving traces- a template to guide the next iteration and before you know it I have worked 60 hours on the same painting."

With that being said, why faces? Where did the inspiration for painting these faces come from?" I rarely have an idea in mind when I start a new portrait other than I am going to paint a face. I force myself to continually paint faces - same composition, same relative dimensions, but produced in a different way" Stoehr says. "I want to dig deeper and more fully explore faces because I am not where I want to be yet. Faces are my vehicles to explore human emotion."

More recently he's been adding hands into the equation, in an effort to get more practice in his drawing ability and showcase the variety of expressions one can demonstrate with their hands.

As far as William Stoehr’s creative process goes, he typically will begin with a model seated in front of him for a couple hours, and will finish by referring to photographs. He strategically uses metallic paint in his works so that depending on how you look at his work, facial structure and features can change, creating different moods that depend on your visual perspective of the piece. He treats his works like an experiment almost, purposefully creating problems so he forces himself to get inventive. In his own words, Stoehr said, "Creativity (is) the practice of making in the moment as a response to something; a stimulus, an idea, a challenge, maybe a drip of paint. That drip of paint running down my canvas may be a random occurrence but my reaction to it is not. What matters most to me is recognizing which accident or experiment might be useful and then how to exploit it now and decide if I want to replicate it later."

When it comes to depth and meaning to his work, up until some recent works, William Stoehr left the meaning of a painting up to the viewer. He paints with this in mind: "If I create ambiguity with abstraction and a few naturalistic cues then maybe you create reality. That is because you complete the image, you create the narrative, and you project your own emotions. You will do a better job with your own perfect mental image than I can. The message is your message to create." It's this idea that lingers behind Stoehr’s favorite
piece, 'Destiny 7". When asked to elaborate, he said, "I tried to make an abstract image feel like a very real person. She is also a good example of some of my favorite techniques." With this work, he used the technique of illusion, creating masks and shrouds with her face. Stoehr said, "I think we are drawn to alternately try to peek behind the shroud, to penetrate this veneer trying to grasp what lies behind the mask and peer out. The mask can provide safety and shield us or it can restrict us. It can allow us to be a voyeur. Hope might emerge from behind it one day and evil the next. It can be protective one day and sinister another. It is up to you, the viewer, to decide what it is."

To be blunt, William Stoehr is a creative genius, and the world appears to agree. His inspiration stems from great artists such as Picasso, Willem de Kooning, Marlene Dumas, Rembrandt, and Leonardo to name a few, and it certainly shows. We asked which of his influences he’d love to meet if it were possible, and to no surprise, it was Picasso. "I would go back a hundred years and meet Picasso. I would like to paint alongside him. I am more interested in how he thought rather than how he painted. I am especially interested in how he perceived reality and how he thought we create visual images in our brain. I think he might have thought about such things."

As for the rest of us, the masters of the stick figure who are aching to turn out a true masterpiece, William Stoehr left us with a bit of advice. "Learn to draw. Study art history. Find your voice. At the end of the day you must ask what you can accomplish as an artist. I have to believe that the essence of art is in its exploration of the important issues of our time." Well said, William Stoehr. We wish you nothing but the best of luck as you continue to conduct the "search for Essential Reality", one magnificent work of art at a time.