

Student artists with SM ties gain notoriety at Washburn

Byline: Heather Perry

The term "starving artist" is so romanticized that it is often difficult to distinguish the clichéd image of an artist painting away in a charming little studio, happily living off nothing but passion, and the bleak reality of what it really means to starve for one's art.

If an artist isn't starved, the hunger from constantly feeding the creative beast inside at least takes its toll. Words like "misunderstood" and "underappreciated" are frequently associated with unsuccessful art careers. But fame and monetary success are not reasons an artist is formed.

For Washburn University senior art major, Maria Haag, instances that reassure her why she chose the creative life happen during unexpected moments.

"I was in my house and it was two in the morning and I had to finish my painting for class. I was getting so upset, and then all of a sudden, I filled in the middle and it just came alive. It was amazing," she described.

The 25-year-old considers the best part of painting to be able to bring something to life that wasn't alive before. She uses color to do just that. Haag also faces challenges. She has already realized what does and does not sell in the art world.

"It's a cliché; if you want to sell your work, paint landscapes," she said after half joking that large-scale hand paintings (her specialty) do not sell.

One of Haag's hand paintings *has* recently brought her slight fame and monetary success though. Her 30 by 40 inch oil painting titled, "Objects in Mirror" won the prestigious Pollack Award from Washburn.

The award has been given out to just one student a year since 1973 and the winning piece is chosen by the Art Department faculty. Haag received compensation for her piece, which will be permanently housed and often displayed at the Mulvane Art Museum on campus.

"Objects in Mirror" expertly portrays not one, but two hand close-ups. It is a depiction of Haag's own hand holding a fresh lime. Her hand's image is reflected in a rearview mirror with the words, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear" displayed. The original hand is paralleled in the reflection, but instead of looking young and fresh, both the hand and the lime are old and wrinkled. The piece is a commentary on the inevitable process of aging.

The painting is currently showcased at the museum, but is not the only piece by Haag on display. Three of her other oil paintings were chosen to be included in the museum's student exhibit.

The exhibit features art from students who use various media platforms including painting, drawing, ceramics, photography, printmaking, sculpture, graphic design and mixed media. Each year, a new juror decides which pieces match his or her vision of what the show should be.

This year's juror was Dan Kirchhefer, Professor of Drawing and Printmaking at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kan. The exhibit began on April 5 and will continue until May 11.

Two of Haag's showcased paintings are landscapes, while one is a detailed close-up of an elderly woman's wrinkled hands grasping a cane, titled "Weatherworn." The woman used for inspiration is a family friend from St. Marys, Kan., the place where Haag spent summers as a child and worked as a CNA at the manor.

While at Washburn, Haag befriended fellow student, junior Jessica McAtarian, 21. McAtarian grew up in St. Marys and attended St. Marys Academy, where she herself gained a love for art. McAtarian still lives in the town and currently works at Ray's Apple Market and for her father's company, Andax Industries.

One of McAtarian's pieces of art was also selected to be in the student exhibit. Her showcased piece is a black and white oil painting titled "Lily Serenity." It was the first painting that she created at Washburn University. The inspiration for her work is a fish pond outside of the art building.

"Something that actually kind of happened, and I didn't notice it until the painting was finished... it got some sort of three dimensionality," she said about her piece. "It actually does seem to be coming out of the frame, and it's just one of those happy surprises that just kind of shows up."

Haag's other two oil paintings at the exhibit are titled, "Riven" and "Early Spring on Vermont Street." The latter depicts a parking lot puddle that reflects an image of a red apartment building in Lawrence, Kan.

"Riven" displays a crack in the road at Oregon Trail Park, close to where her parents live. She said that this painting was the hardest one to complete out of the three, because depicting pavement photorealistically is a tough task to accomplish. She eventually changed course about the realistic look and it paid off.

Creating a piece of valuable art is a daunting task. Haag said that sometimes she has to leave a painting while hating it, just to come back to it the next day. Oftentimes, she is able to see the piece with a new perspective and appreciate what she created in a way that she couldn't the day before.

"There are those times when it comes together and it's almost like the art is making itself," McAtarian said about her own creative process. "Because you're getting so frustrated, thinking, 'This isn't what I wanted' and then it's there. It's like, how'd that happen?"

Both Haag and McAtarian had people in their lives who helped inspire them to become artists. Haag's mother ran a painting business and went to art school while McAtarian's art teacher from the Academy, Mrs. Armesto, taught her students everything from pencil drawings to stained glass techniques.

"She is a fantastic artist," McAtarian said about Armesto. "She introduced us to pretty much every type of art there was."

McAtarian also cultivated her artistic skills outside of the art classroom in school, to the dismay of her teachers.

"Ask all of my teachers from the Academy, especially the Sisters. They didn't really like the fact that I doodled in my notebooks, everywhere. Everything from dragons to horses to trees," she said. She added that she enjoys mythology and tries to incorporate it into her art.

Haag also enjoyed art in high school, but was told that she could not make a living off of it. After going to college for nursing for a couple of years, she decided to take a year off to reevaluate. During that time, she decided that her love for art was just too large to ignore.

"It's been a great decision," she said. "Definitely where I'm supposed to be."

Haag is currently proving the naysayers wrong by actually making a living utilizing her artistic talents. She is a graphic designer for GTM Sportswear. Though she is not sure where she wants to end up, Haag will be applying to graduate schools sometime after graduation from Washburn.

Her ultimate goal is to make a living as a full-time painter, but hopes that a Master's Degree will help her land a job as a teacher at a university or allow her to work in a museum.

McAtarian is not planning on graduate school as of now, but strives to find a job as a graphic designer after graduation. She hopes that she will be able to build up an inventory of material arts while doing this, so that eventually she will be able to launch herself as an artist.

McAtarian loves the town of St. Marys and wants to continue living there. She said that if she does move away temporarily she will use those experiences for inspiration in her art, but St. Marys will always be home.

"That's going to be my settling grounds," she said.

Artists are frequently characterized as dreamers, but that does not mean that they are impractical. Both McAtarian and Haag live in balance between the materialistic world filled with obstacles and the one meant for dreamers, where creativity is currency. These modern artists plan on fighting the "starving" stigma to enjoy successes both large and small.

In the meantime, a little Ramen never hurt anybody.

Washburn University's Student Exhibit is showcased at the Mulvane Art Museum on Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Wednesday through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The museum is open on Saturday and Sundays from 1-4 p.m. Admission is free. All three of Haag's paintings can be purchased and some of the other pieces are for sale as well.

To see more art created by Maria Haag go to: <http://cargocollective.com/mariahaagart>.

To see more art created by Jessica McAtarian go to: <http://cargocollective.com/Dragonfirejess>.