

From the Oregonian Newspaper Front pge of the Living section

Magnetic North

Artists express their strong bond with the often-stereotyped area they call home

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On a city map, North Portland doesn't look terribly far from the rest of the metro area. But those who live there sometimes feel that, where other parts of town are concerned, they might as well be on the moon.

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"People say it's out of the way," says Rhoda London, an artist who lives in St. Johns. "Out of the way of what? Do they say that to people in Beaverton? It's the southwest that's out of the way."

It's that combination of impatience with how they're perceived, plus pride in what makes the area unique, that became the driving force for "Living Routes and Roots: An Exhibition About Living on the Peninsula by North Portland Artists." The show, which runs through April 29 at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, brings together work by 19 artists who live in neighborhoods of North Portland -- St. Johns, Kenton, Portsmouth, Arbor Lodge, University Park, Cathedral Park and Overlook -- and reflects their feelings about where they call home.

Bonnie Meltzer, an artist and New Jersey native who has lived in North Portland for nearly 30 years, helped organize the show as a way to let the area's ever-growing community of artists express themselves. The paintings, sculpture, installations and other pieces in the show address varied aspects of life on the peninsula -- the closeness of nature found in Smith and Bybee Lakes, well-used and beloved parks, the iconic beauty of the St. Johns Bridge, the diversity of the community.

Meltzer and other artists gathered on a recent afternoon to install works for the show in the upstairs gallery of the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center. For her contribution, Meltzer created a mixed-media work called "Blue Collar, White Collar, Green Collar, More," a response to the decades-old categorization of North Portland as a working-class area. Meltzer took cabinet-grade plywood and carved it into the shape of a short-sleeved shirt, on which she affixed 83 reproduced images of neighborhood people.

It's a colorful patchwork of faces and descriptors: violinist, opera singer, carpet installer, judge, cookie salesgirls, student, clown, research scientist, teacher and more.

"There's nothing wrong with blue-collar," Meltzer says of the often-repeated description of the area. "But it's so much more varied than that. And that pigeonholing dismisses it; it suggests we don't have to care about it."

In the hall outside the gallery, Dawn Phelps McConnell examines her piece, a circa-'50s vanity on which she's painted a moodily poetic rendering of Peninsula Park. "The park is near my house and I have a dog, so I walk through almost every day," McConnell says. She's fond of the streetlights and the trees. "I love to watch the trunks of the trees," she says; "the texture is like elephant skin." On the vanity, McConnell painted dark, sculptural tree branches contrasting with deep-blue sky lit by van Gogh-style stars.

McConnell hopes people from all over will visit the exhibit and see some of what she's learned in her years as a North Portlander. "I've lived in Northwest and in Southeast, and I think I know more of my neighbors here than I did there." That's true, she says, even as North Portland has had less commercial development and fewer of the gathering places it creates than other parts of town. "I think because this is sort of a transitional neighborhood, the people who move in are more enthusiastic about making it a community."

Rhoda London, who moved to North Portland about three years ago, has lived all over the world, from her native New York to Europe to Oakland, Calif. Her installation continues her exploration of the concepts of home, belonging and immigration, a focus she has addressed in works exhibited at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, among other venues. London's interactive work will ask gallery visitors to put their own fingerprints on a wall hanging and write about their experiences in a notebook. In her travels, London says, she has seen that people find countless ways in which to divide themselves from each other. Her installation, she hopes, will help people ask themselves, "What makes you feel different? And how do you break down those barriers?"

The sense of isolation created by North Portland's geographical boundaries may foster a stronger bond to the area, as Tom Griffin-Valade has found. As director of the city's North Portland Neighborhood Services, Griffin-Valade has listened to residents' frustrations and joys.

"Many people here feel that there's a misperception about the community, often based on the concept that there's a lot of onerous activities that go on out here -- the wastewater treatment is out here, the dump was out here, the state's largest chunk of heavy industrial activity surrounds the area, too, when you put Swan Island and Rivergate together. Part of the district has flyovers from the airport."

Despite those perceptions, North Portland has become a hot real estate market, Griffin-Valade says, attracting young families, singles and artists.

"My sense is that people here really understand where they come from; they don't see themselves as coming from Portland as a whole, but from the neighborhoods." That's helped by the area's rough borders -- the Willamette and Columbia rivers and Interstate 5. "Where Southeast bleeds into East and Southwest bleeds into Northwest, here you don't do any bleeding before you get really wet, or run over by the freeway. So there are fierce loyalties to the area that I haven't experienced in other parts of the city."

The evolution of North Portland will only continue, Griffin-Valade says, once the Interstate light-rail line opens in May. Also in the works is a city-drafted plan to revitalize North Lombard Street and the St. Johns downtown core, a project supported by some residents and business owners and opposed by others.

But now, North Portland is exactly what artist Laura Foster, who moved there from Virginia about five years ago, is looking for. Her piece in the "Living Routes and Roots" show, combines lights, cloth forms and intricately detailed wax molds of objects, animals and trash collected from Foster's explorations of Smith and Bybee Lakes Wildlife Area. "It's two miles from my house, and we can bike over there and see bald eagles," Foster says, arranging a wax casting of found objects of twigs, a paper wrapper and a pair of scissors. Done in wax, the items take on a severe beauty, like the findings of an archaeological dig.

For all the harm civilization has done and can do to an area like the Smith and Bybee Lakes, this corner of the world endures. "You get there, and sometimes it stinks, and it's nasty," Foster says. "But you look at it, and it's this whole world, and it's thriving, and it's lovely."

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