

ARTS

Timeless words

Winter landscapes converge with quotes from historical figures

By Angie Sykeny
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Winter walks and a trip to Washington, D.C., are what inspired Boston artist Matt Brackett's latest exhibition, "Bitter Chill," on view Jan. 23 through Feb. 29 at the McIninch Art Gallery at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester, with an opening reception and artist talk on Thursday, Jan. 23.

Brackett's work, which consists almost exclusively of oil paintings, has been through several evolutions since he started painting full time in 2003.

He first became known, he said, for his semi-allegorical and semi-autobiographical figurative pieces.

"They were paintings with people in them that looked naturalistic and real but suggested a story or narrative that wasn't quite spelled out and was carefully designed to provoke an interpretation from the viewer," Brackett said.

In 2011, Brackett was diagnosed with cancer (he is now five years cancer-free) and his art began to incorporate darker themes involving animals and landscapes.

"It was pretty difficult work to process, but it was more emotionally resonant to me at that time," he said.

Brackett eventually returned to figurative work until 2016, the year of the presidential election.

"The election was a jarring moment for me ... [and I was] deeply shocked and saddened by the election results," he said.



"Stranger in a Strange Land" by Matt Brackett. The quote on the frame of the painting reads, "I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land." - Harriet Tubman, 1887. Courtesy photo.

The following winter, Boston had a series of winter storms that Brackett, who typically doesn't do much hiking, said were "calling [him] outside to walk in them." He would go alone, exploring wild areas and finding beauty in the active storms, which had a "consoling effect" for him. He started taking pictures on his walks to use as inspiration for a new artistic project he had been pondering.

The second part of the inspiration for that project came from a family trip to Washington, D.C. There, he saw the words of people from U.S. history whom he admired, like

John Adams, Red Cloud, Harriet Tubman, Theodore Roosevelt, Frances Harper and other notable women and people of color who helped move the country in progressive directions, memorialized and celebrated throughout the city.

"I felt that their words are in direct conflict with the words from our current administration, and I ruminated on that," he said. "I wanted to delve into those words [of the people I admired]."

Brackett then started a new series of work, which included winter landscape paintings,

based on the photographs he took on his winter walks, done on panel, with custom painted frames on which he put some of his favorite quotes from those historical people, written in ink in calligraphy.

"My language is painting, but I felt like I needed to say more to give more weight to [the winter landscapes]," he said. "So I decided to repeat those words because I felt like they needed to be shared during this national crisis."

That series, consisting of 25 pieces, makes up the "Bitter Chill" exhibit, which Brackett said is "an expression of protest" and a "fight for justice," but "doesn't directly critique the current administration." His mission with the exhibit, he said, is to encourage people to reflect on the intentions, ideals and morals of the people who fought to make the U.S. a better country.

"I think those ideals are in jeopardy right now and are something that we need to continue to fight for," he said. "I'm just trying to spark thought and spark conversation, because that's where it starts." 🍷

"Bitter Chill" by Matt Brackett

When: Jan. 23 through Feb. 29, with an opening reception and artist talk on Thursday, Jan. 23, at 5 p.m.

Where: McIninch Art Gallery, located in Robert Frost Hall at Southern New Hampshire University, 2500 N. River Road, Manchester

Visit: mattbrackett.com

Hip - the Hippo

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