

From the Fabric of Life

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There is something about being someplace else.

That's how Alice Spencer describes the result of her travels on her art. "It turns your work upside down," she said.

Spencer, a Portland painter and printmaker, is a voracious traveler and collector of cultural items. She and her husband, Dick, have ventured from Guatemala to Mongolia, from Uzbekistan to Indonesia.

Wherever they go, they collect a local textile - a blouse from Guatemala, a sari from India, a shaman's robe from Ecuador.

"We've collected textiles for 30, 35 years with no particular agenda or purpose. It gave us a way to penetrate more deeply the places we visited," she said.

The textiles represent a culture in a way that another keepsake might not. They feel meaningful because they embody the human spirit. They are often colorful, full of symbolism and designed with a dual purpose of utility and elegance.

"They were a way for us to bring back some sort of understanding of where we've been," Spencer said.

In a new exhibition at the University of New England Art Gallery in Portland, Spencer presents a series of paintings inspired by her textile collection, using pattern as a metaphor for the human spirit and the layering of time.

The show, "Fabricating Time," includes paintings and textiles. It opens with a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. Thursday, and will be on display through Jan. 11.

Lynn Felsher, curator of textiles at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, said Spencer's interest in textiles serves as an access point to other cultures, which she pursues in her paintings.

"The textiles are woven by the caring hands of people with strong textile traditions who take pride in their work," Felsher writes in the exhibition catalog. "Their stories, embedded in the threads, are heard by the artist and retold through her paintings."

VISUAL REFERENCES

For Spencer's paintings, the textiles serve as visual references, not unlike a sketchbook or even a travelogue.

Using the gestures, patterns and colors of the textiles as a starting point, she creates improvisational compositions with a series of repeating shapes and related colors.

There is a sense of geometric exuberance to her work, with each finely executed brush stroke of her paintings representing a careful stitch of the textiles. There is a matrix, or measured order.

Spencer prepares her surface with a layer of gesso mixed with sand and applied on a heavy paper. The mixture gives texture to the surface and a tactile element reminiscent of fabric.

The paper is then affixed to board, and the process of layering with paint begins. Using acrylic paints, she creates a series of motifs whose designs originate in her collection of textiles - an embroidered star pattern from a tent panel from Kazakhstan, the suggestion of a fern from a woman's shawl from Bolivia, a turtle and fish from a hip cloth from Indonesia.

Not all recurring motifs are culturally sacred. Spencer borrows the arched "M" from an American hamburger chain's logo in her work, as well as the symbol of a popular athletic shoe maker and global computer giant.

For Spencer, the process is laborious and consuming. The work is finely detailed, and she often feels the paintings are never truly finished, that there is always an opportunity to add something.

The paintings also feel like the culmination of a long process. She's been working on them for a solid four years, but the journey began 15 years ago, when she was stricken with cancer.

Being sick brought her life into focus in a new way. She went through a year of chemotherapy, and throughout her treatment maintained a committed studio schedule. During her weakest days, she threw herself completely into her work.

Her paintings resembled torsos - crude hourglass forms that suggested the human body, or a tree with branches that served metaphorically as a stand-in for the human body.

Sometime later, when she was feeling better, one of her grown children went to Mexico as an anthropology student. Spencer went to visit, and became interested in the concept of layering. She began thinking about how the patterns of culture often are scattered and reconstructed across societies and over time.

That led her back to her textile collection as a source of inspiration and influence.

Spencer's artwork took her in many directions. She began working with a hammer and chisel, creating sculpture from stone. Later, she co-founded the Peregrine Press, a cooperative of Portland-based printmakers.

In 2004, Spencer completed an artist residency in Newfoundland. During that retreat, she resolved some of the artistic questions that had vexed her, and came home with her clearest understanding yet about how to use the textiles in her work, and they hold such meaning.

"In the end," she said, "these paintings say something about time, and about the human existence through time."

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