The Northern Rockies Arts Council Presents:

The Artist Spotlight Series

Sean Faherty

Wet Paint, Sharp Edges, and the Art of Not Overthinking It

ARTIST PROFILE

Artist:
Sean Faherty

Medium:
Oil painting

Technique:
Wet on Wet

Location:
Fort Nelson, BC

Artist Quote:
"I think art is like a joke, if you need to explain it, it didn't work."

A Character in Oil

Some artists arrive at their work through polished statements and careful explanations. Sean Faherty is not especially interested in any of that.

An oil painter based in Fort Nelson, BC, Sean speaks about art with the same blunt honesty that seems to guide his paintings: direct, funny, a little gruff, and entirely himself. Listening to him talk about painting is a bit like standing in front of one of his portraits. There is depth, character, and humour, along with the sense that many stories exist beneath the surface.

Sean recently held an exhibition at the Phoenix Theatre in Fort Nelson, where he showed 18 paintings. It was his second exhibition, and when asked what compelled him to put the work up, his answer was simple.

"I just got the idea and I just thought the hell with it. Why not?"

That answer says a lot about Sean's approach. No long explanation of meaning. No attempt to make the process sound more precious than it is.

"I think art is like a joke," he says. "If you need to explain it, it didn't work."

Wet Paint and One Sitting

Sean works primarily in oil using a wet-on-wet technique, often completing a painting in a single sitting. Rather than building a piece slowly over many sessions, he works while the paint is fresh, letting the method set the pace and limits.

"I try to do everything in one sitting, wet into wet," he explains. "So, that kind of slows it down and it kind of limits what you can do at one time."

Most of his paintings take between two and eight hours, and he currently paints two to three pieces a week. He often works with a reduced palette unless the painting demands otherwise.

"I generally use a reduced palette, just a few colours, and I might add a couple here and there if I need them."

It is a practical approach, but not a careless one. Sean works from dark to light, big shapes to small, and when something feels wrong, he steps back.

"If it's wrong, it's wrong," he says. "What I find I generally need to do is just stand back. If I stand back 10 feet, or even go for a coffee if I can't figure out what is wrong, but I generally stand back and look at a painting and then I think, what's the thing I don't like the most? That's what I need to work on next."

55Years of Experiment

When asked whether he went through an experimental phase to find his style and medium, Sean laughs.

"Well, this is about 55 years of experimental phase so far. It's all an experimental phase."

Before the oils, portraits, and exhibition walls, there was drawing. Sean remembers drawing as a child with his granny and his sisters.

"I started off just drawing like every kid in the world, right? Hanging out with my granny and my sisters and drawing. That's how they could keep me shut up."

> "I try to do everything in one sitting, wet into wet, so that kind of slows it down and it kind of limits what you can do at one time."

basics she taught him: proportion, observation, and the usefulness of a stick as a measuring tool.

"Lots of it was going backwards to the basics that my granny taught me about just getting proportioned and using a stick."

As a child, Sean also found his way into wood carving. He remembers sitting in a tree fort with Kevin Kobachuk when he was 11 and deciding he was a wood carver.

"That led to a lot of cut fingers," he says. "But that's really what I did. I just drew and carved for a long time."

Then, in 2013, Jacky Riggs gave him a Bob Ross painting kit. Sean started with landscapes, then moved into animals, though flowers never really became his thing.

"I drank the Kool-Aid on Bob Ross," he says. "That's what I'm trying to say. Everything but the flowers."

The Pull of Portaits

From there, Sean began experimenting with portraits. Portraiture became the subject that held him.

"I just love portraits," Sean says. "I love that illusion when you look at something and it looks like it's sticking out, or it looks like something's happening inside the frame. It's really neat to me."

His subjects seem to find him less through planning than through instinct. Sometimes there is a personal connection. Sometimes he likes someone and wants to paint them. More often than anything else, it comes down to light.

"It's usually light," he says. "Sometimes there's a connection. Sometimes I like someone, I'll say, 'Yeah, I want to paint you.' I'll drag you out, you know, drag them over to where there's some light."

Sean is not interested in making people look overly staged. He likes a moment that feels unpolished, natural, and real.

"I let it happen naturally," he says. "And the more dragged out and rough they look, the more I like it, you know, the less prepared."

Rather than asking people to sit for hours, he takes a quick reference photo and paints from that later.

"I just take a photo quickly so I don't harass them for hours," he says. "And then I end up with too many damn portraits."

> "I love that illusion when you look at something and it looks like it's sticking out, or it looks like something's happening inside the frame.

Letting the Work Speak

Sean's style continues to shift as his practice develops.

"I switch up my style quite a bit," he says. "Sometimes they're more impressionistic, sometimes they're more realistic, sometimes they're just a mess."

For Sean, every tool, subject, and painting seems to become part of the same long experiment. Nothing is final, and nothing is too precious.

"I just try to think about the instant, that moment, being honest with what that image is," he says. "I purposely don't think too much about these things."

When asked what advice he would give aspiring artists, he does not offer a complicated philosophy.

"It's time," he says. "I just tell people, if you want to do it, you can. Most people just need to draw more, right? Like anybody. Me, too."

As for teaching, Sean is less drawn to formal instruction. He would rather paint alongside someone than stand in front of them as a traditional teacher.

"I don't worry if it's good or bad," he says. "I think there's some that I like more than others and I'll know that one's better than the others. But when I go in, I don't care if I think it's going to be good or bad. It's not what I think it's going to be, and it's best just to be surprised."

"I switch up my style quite a bit," he says. "Sometimes they're more impressionistic, sometimes they're more realistic, sometimes they're just a mess."

Still Willing to Be Surprised

That may be the clearest way to understand Sean Faherty's work. He paints the person in front of him, the light as it falls, the moment before it becomes too arranged. He does not need every painting to arrive with a speech.

"The work either lands, or it doesn't. The joke either works, or it doesn't. The face either comes alive inside the frame, or it doesn't."

And still, he keeps painting.

After 55 years of the experimental phase, Sean Faherty does not sound like someone looking for answers. He sounds like someone still willing to be surprised.

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