Sacred Heart University

From the Selected Works of Nathan Lewis

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Portrait of That Moment When…

Nathan Lewis

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Art Professor Nathan Lewis capturing ‘studenthood’ in new work for Bergoglio Hall

By Timothy Deenihan

Nathan Lewis is at it again.

Back in 2012, in anticipation of Sacred Heart’s 50th anniversary, the professor of art, painting, drawing and design took on the challenge of painting a portrait of the University. The finished work (hanging in Linda’s dining hall in the Student Commons) is remarkable in its breadth, depth and beauty, capturing not only the moments that have helped shape the campus and community we know and see today, but also somehow drawing out the character of that community, the greater Person that is the sum of all those personalities.

Working from his studio in Seymour, Lewis returned to that same Person, one might say, but with a specific look at one age in life: what is it like being a student? The new work, entitled “Finding their Voices,” was unveiled in late January in the soaring atrium of the brand new Jorge Bergoglio Residence Hall.

It was a unique challenge. Usually in portraiture, the artist seeks to capture the subject at a particular moment or age in time. But the Person of the University is an array of ages all at once, rather like
light is all the colors of the rainbow. For this particular work, Lewis had to focus on the color that is a moment in time between two pieces of paper—an acceptance letter and a degree.

Then there’s the challenge that, as any and every teen since the dawn of time has shouted from their sock-strewn bedrooms, we don’t know what it’s like to be them. Joking aside, if the changes in fashion and sensibilities aren’t obvious enough, just consider that Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are but 12, 11, and 10 years old, respectively, and your smartphone is younger still. New buildings and expanding campus aside, it’s a whole different world out there from the one the older generations knew at their age.

Together, however, these challenges may neatly illuminate the distinction between portraiture and self-portraiture—playing into exactly what makes Lewis so good at what he does.

We all become used to our lives to some extent or other, failing to see our own beauty—or our own faults—often out of nothing more than familiarity and the distraction of purpose. Through portraiture, however, the great artists offers up their subjects with humble honesty, free of judgment, for good or for ill, often seeing more in the subjects than the subjects ever saw in themselves.

“Students are students for four years,” Lewis explains. “Their time here is over in a flash. It’s really hard to see a thing when you’re right in the middle of it.

“As a teacher, on the other hand, you see the larger cycle—what changes with time, and what stays the same,” he says.

And so what of studenthood is universal? “On the better days of being a professor, you get to see kids become adults,” Lewis says with a softness that reflects an awe and appreciation for this particular stage of life’s journey. “I focused on that.”

Kids often aspire to be grown-ups without necessarily realizing that the journey there is the process we refer to as “growing up”—trying on adulthood in pieces, stepping into the worn shoes of responsibility and learning to carry the mantle of opportunity. Sometimes, as Lewis notes, the kids get it right.

Sometimes they don’t. And, yes, if the portrait is to be honest, it must show a few of the scars.

“Making it all sunshine and light would be disingenuous,” Lewis says. “A kid will make bad decisions; some don’t fit in. As a painter, I want to honor what I see. I want to go after that complexity. At the same time, I have to be conscious of how the work will be read.

He was not sure how he was going to portray his vision when he started the portrait, he says. “Oftentimes you just have to put it down [by which he means the actual paint on the actual canvas] to see if it’s going to work. If you could know beforehand what a painting was going to do, I don’t know why you’d do it. There’s something about the process that takes you places you couldn’t have imagined.”

This curiosity—for the subject, of the process—is the very thing that has helped Lewis find his home at SHU. “There’s a shared love of investigation, of curiosity, that’s part of life on a liberal-arts campus,” he explains. “You hang out with people in this environment—experts in all their fields—and it’s like the project, itself. You have some ideas going in, but...”

Just like the process of painting.
Just like the process of growing up.

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