Sacred Heart University

From the SelectedWorks of Nathan Lewis

Spring 2013

Artists' Corner: The Essence of Sacred Heart

Nathan Lewis, Sacred Heart University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/nathan_lewis/2/
The Essence of Sacred Heart

THE IDEA OF A COMMISSIONED PORTRAIT IS NOTHING NEW TO ART. And there are rules, established as much by the whim of the commissioner as by the wisdom of the artist. Certainly there is the desire to compliment, but flattery will not be tolerated. There is handsomeness in honesty and integrity and truth. Above all else, of course, the subject must be immediately recognizable to one and all. The sparkle in the eye, the slightly lopsided grin, the unique soul must be authentic and evident.

Capturing the third and fourth dimensions of a subject—its depth and invisible essence—on a two-dimensional canvas is what elevates portraiture to a level of art. Challenging enough when the subject is a person. But how does one paint a portrait of a university?

The first thing he did was to reach out via email to the larger University community, asking them what they felt he should know about the school—its classes, its disciplines, clubs, people, values, purpose and the like. “The people are very proud of the community service that goes on here,” Lewis says. “A huge amount of the responses talked about that. And the candlelight vigils that happen. Those matter a lot.”

Though discussion about the specific content of the painting will have to await the work’s unveiling (scheduled for September 2013), the artist is happy to discuss the sources of his thought process and inspiration. Candles, for example, seem to be developing as a theme of the mural, both literally representing the vigils, which obviously touch so many hearts on the University about the University—a work that would not only allow the audience to recognize themselves, but to see themselves as part of something larger; in essence, a portrait of the University.

“I had an idea of what the University meant to me,” says Lewis, sitting in his studio, in front of the enormous 6’x18’ canvas which will soon wear the face—with all its facets—of Sacred Heart. “But that wasn’t enough. It’s a lot bigger than I am.”

The photos included in this feature were taken by Nathan Lewis as a study for the mural. All of the different scenarios represent the many facets of SHU.
Faith, honesty, and campus, and also figuratively implying the intangible essence of both faith and education. Lewis also admits having made reference to Raphael’s *The School of Athens* in his proposal for the work.

Above all else, however, the finished work must communicate with its audience. As a portrait, we must sense a story. As an 18-foot-long mural, we must also be able to decipher it.

“It’s the challenge of working within certain requirements,” Lewis explains. “That’s what both scares me and excites me. Can you tell the story you are going to tell and still make a great painting? Are you enough of an artist to make something that’s going to hold up?”

It would seem, however, that being scared is a far cry from being worried. “I really do think doubt is part of any artist’s work. It keeps us honest,” Lewis says.

Then there’s the grind of creating a work on this scale. He’s had the assistance of three student interns, helping him with everything from sorting through the emails he’s received about the project to photographing the people, places and events that will form the action of the piece. They’ve even been there for the construction of the canvas itself.

He reflects upon the nature of the mural taking shape in his mind. “This format—basically a Japanese canvas—provides a great opportunity for the eye to move through the piece.” Essential, if one hopes to keep a modern technophile audience standing still and engaged in front of a static work of art.

First brush strokes began in January. Before then, there was much more groundwork to be done—the 99 percent perspiration, if you will, that allows for the one percent inspiration. “Getting the source material is satisfying, but I always want to get to the painting,” Lewis says with a quiet glint belying a barely capped boyish impatience to play. “I am way calmer then.”

But how will he know when he’s reached the end?

Again, the smile. “I’m not worried about that,” he says. “Not with this piece. It’ll tell me when I’m done.”

Which, for the rest of us, will be just the beginning.

---

Nathan Lewis, M.F.A.
PROFESSOR OF ART, PAINTING, DRAWING & DESIGN

Professor Nathan Lewis’s route to the faculty of the Art Department at Sacred Heart University has been circuitous, to put it mildly.

Growing up in California, Nathan began his studies at Sacramento City College. Between those early days and his current position at SHU, he has studied and worked as far afield as St. Petersburg, Russia and Florence, Italy, in addition to his time earning a bachelor’s degree in fine arts at Lyme Academy (where he met his wife, art historian Joy Pepe) and his master’s in fine arts at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University.

The artist considers Fred Dalkey, an art professor at his first school and now a longtime friend and colleague, as the one who helped him discover his vocation. Their most recent collaboration—

A Life of Looking: Fred Dalkey and Nathan Lewis—opens at the Knight Campus Art Gallery, Community College of Rhode Island, in April. For inspiration, Lewis turns to “the weirdos of literature, poetry and music—Kafka, Borges, Wallace Stevens and Nietzsche,” whom he particularly admires for inspiring the marriage of his artistic temper and scientific mind.

Now in his sixth year on the faculty at Sacred Heart, Lewis reflects upon his own values by speaking of those values he sees in his students. “I see them thinking so practically. That’s important for the day-to-day stuff, but education and art are both very spiritual experiences,” Lewis says. “Art,” he says, “the same as education, is how we define our existence.”

To keep up with the progress of the mural, follow Nathan’s project on Facebook at www.tinyurl.com/ShuMural.