Artist Helps New Interpretive Room

By Victoria Ford

The cornerstone of the Ocean County Historical Society's new exhibit space in the basement of the Hadley Avenue museum is a mural of a Lenape scene – an oil painting by fine artist Michelle Farro, 31, of Whiting, formerly of Toms River.



Michelle Farro.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

For Farro, a fulltime artist and freelance instructor, the project was an honor and a welcome challenge.

"As an artist, it can be easy to stay in the studio," she said – a feeling many creative types share. The mural job had her on display in a way she hadn't been before, developing the work in view of passersby, who enjoyed watching the process unfold.

The project was "a long time in the making," beginning in 2018 when a woman in one of Farro's art classes approached her on behalf of the Society. The timing coincides with the Society's reimagining and updating the space.

Partly what prompted the change was the discovery of 12 boxes of Native American artifacts "up in the eaves," all documented by the Archeological Society of New Jersey. In addition, Historical Society President Brian Bovasso explained, the Oyster Creek Nuclear Generating Station in Lacey Township, as part of the plant's decommissioning, disassembled the museum it had on its property and donated the glass cases and memorabilia to the Ocean County museum.

By way of parameters, Farro was given the concept of a Lenape village scene but otherwise had full creative freedom to explore subject matter that excited her. She did a lot of research, looked at the local landscape, and worked up three different sketches to show the board of trustees.

Farro's motivation was to tell a story in conjunction with the items in the cases around the room. The work was completed over a four-week period and installed in mid-October. While working she would immerse herself in the Lenape world for four-hour blocks of time. Having onlookers view the work in incomplete stages was new and weird for her, she confessed. The underpainting, for example, is a part of the process artists often feel self-conscious about. But the general feedback was positive and encouraging; people were pleased – many said they had never before watched a painting develop from beginning to end.

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Farro studied drawing and painting at Laguna College of Art and Design in Laguna Beach, Calif., and at the Florence Academy of Arts in Italy. In her career, she has deviated somewhat from the traditional techniques of her education and skewed more contemporary, verging on impressionistic. "Color is very important in my work," she explained. Her pieces "sit somewhere between what I'm actually observing, and a dream, or a memory."

At the museum, Consulting Exhibit Designer Stan Cain built the curved frame for the mural and she prepared the birch plywood surface for the oil paint, which is her medium of choice. It is one of the largest Farro has created (previously she had painted a 4-by-8-foot mural in Nashville, Tenn., celebrating the period charm of Germantown architecture) and required some creative problem solving, Farro admitted. She used a grid system to enlarge her 5-by-10-inch studies. When it was time to bow the wood, she went to Walmart and bought 400 pounds of cat litter to weight it appropriately to form a gentle arc. "It's kind of like boat building," Cain explained.

The composition of the painting includes a boat in the foreground to draw the viewer into the scene, where a couple shares a quiet moment on the shore of the river. The boat plays an essential role as the main method of transportation at that time in history. The whole picture is open to interpretation, with shapes left simple and details left intentionally vague so the viewer can complete the story.

In terms of her use of color, which is integral to her work, "I tend to keep a tighter value," employing subtle tonal shifts, she explained. When she started really learning to see as an artist, she realized an interest or strength of hers is seeing how colors change, even within a seeming "solid" field.

Relative to the rest of her body of work, the Lenape mural ties in a lot of signature colors and shapes, though she sees "a lot more involved, here."

Farro said she feels considerably more confident having completed the project, which she found both validating and freeing. "It all worked out the way I thought it would," she said.



Michelle Farro with her art.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford