

THE VISUAL ARTS

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2006

Harris strives to go with the grain

Most artists who paint on plywood are eager to cover up the medium's distinctive surface. But LauraLee K. Harris goes out of her way to accent the wood's prominent grain in her mid-sized paintings.

"It all started one day when I was looking at this piece of pine and noticed that the grain looked like an image of a woman reaching up to the sky," says the Ontario artist.

"I worked with that original vision and the painting *Tree Spirit* came out of it."

A selection of Harris's recent wood-grain-inspired painting — with various landscape, figurative and semi-abstract themes — is on display at the Bearclaw Gallery.

The process she uses to create her hybrid images is as unique as it is detail-oriented.

First of all, she goes to the local Home Depot hardware store and spends time looking closely at various pieces of plywood to find pieces that have interesting grain patterns and also speak to her on a spiritual and artistic level.

"There's a life, a spirit, a sense of nature embodied in the living grain of the wood."

This fascination with wood grain is longstanding.

"As a kid, I'd just stare at the wood grains in the furniture in my bedroom and daydream. This kind of painting comes naturally to me and works its way up from the subconscious."

Board in hand, she then applies layer after layer of thin acrylic paint onto the porous surface of the wood, slowly building up the image she sees communicated by the grain.

"Every wood has a different hardness and personality, which means that I have to work the paint in differently every time. The great thing about how I paint is that there are no mistakes. Every piece I create is beautiful in its own way."

BEARCLAW GALLERY

Messages Between Blue & Red, new acrylic works on wood panel by LauraLee K. Harris. This exhibition includes visual works accompanied by poetry. Artist in attendance Saturday, 1-4 p.m. Runs until Nov. 30. Information: 10403 124th St., 482-1204.

In her artist statements, Harris has described herself as a kind of wood sculptor working the grain, but at in a surface, two-dimensional fashion.

When she's happy with the image she's created on the board, Harris finishes each work with a coat of thick-gloss urethane. Purposefully aiming for a reflective, glass-like sheen on the wood, she will apply five or six layers of varnish.

"I need that shiny finish because I want people to have the sense that they are looking into the depths of the work. The layers I put into the work are there in front of you."

As for specific images, Harris says the stories she documents arise naturally from the wood in front of her.

"I believe that all life has meaning and there is more to life than what meets the eye. I'm overwhelmed by the fact that these boards were living things, and my paintings are my way of putting forward messages that feed the whole spirit."

Harris also loves the profoundly emotional connection viewers create with her paintings.

"A lot of people are left speechless looking at the paintings. The life people see in the images speaks to the life inside the person looking at the work and does so in a very intimate way."

Gilbert A. Bouchard

EDMONTON JOURNAL



SUPPLIED

The wood grain of plywood is enhanced rather than painted over in LauraLee K. Harris's works.

PREVIEW

LauraLee K. Harris's New Works

Showing at: The Bearclaw Gallery, 10403 124th St.

Until: Nov. 30; meet the artist at the opening reception Saturday from 2 to 5 p.m.