Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Seeking a challenge, professional artist Becca Mulenburg painted 100 portraits of strangers to create a work rich in expression that will be part of an exhibit opening Feb. 17 in Port Washington

“Interrupting a painting’s direction is like peeking under the cloth of a rising mound of bread dough. Leave it alone, let it rise and hope for a good ending.”

That’s how Port Washington artist Becca Mulenburg describes her oil paintings that seem to develop a life of their own.

Of course, it’s not that simple, but it’s the philosophy she used for her latest work — 100 4-inch-square oil portraits titled “Little Faces, Big Expressions” that will be exhibited for the first time Friday, Feb. 17, at Gallery 224 in the Port Harbor Shopping Center in downtown Port Washington.

An opening reception will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. The show will run through March 17.

Mulenburg will be one of three professional artists featured in the gallery’s Portraits show. Port Washington High School honors art students will also display self-portraits.

Although each of Mulenburg’s portraits is a separate piece, they are meant to be displayed together in an exhibit that is 16-feet long by 3-feet high. Mulenburg’s husband Terry, an aerospace engineer, designed the oak frames and the way they connect together in a checkerboard style. His father made the frames.

It took Mulenburg 16 months to complete the work that she undertook to increase her portrait skills and develop a personal style.

“I’d read somewhere that if one wants to learn how to paint something well, paint it over and over,” Mulenburg said. “One hundred was a good number. I reasoned that by the time I got to 100, if I didn’t figure it out by then, I was in trouble.

“Portraits scared me a little, and I like to take on a challenge. I learned a lot and that’s important for me in my art — that I learn something in each session.”

Mulenburg kept a blog of her journey through the 100 portraits — discussing a painting,

commenting on the artistic process or expressing her feelings on life in general.

When the last one — an older man with a mustache and goatee bundled in a hooded parka — was completed, Mulenburg said she didn't feel the elation she expected.

"Well, 100 is finally here. It's been a wonderful journey, and under no circumstances do I feel done," she wrote in her blog. "I thought I would, but there's so much more that lies ahead. So, in case you're wondering, I didn't dance a jig, Hula-Hoop or twirl a baton, not that I would do those things anyway. I'll probably go bowling."

Although the small portraits are detailed and seem personal, Mulenburg doesn't know any of the subjects. She took thousands of photographs of strangers in a variety of places, then went home and chose which one she would paint that day.

"I didn't want any feelings to get in the way," Mulenburg said. "People have said, 'I think that's John,' but I can't tell them if it is or isn't. I don't know."

If someone recognizes themselves when the portraits are in the show, that will be interesting, she said.

Mulenburg did each portrait in one sitting and did not alter them once they were finished.

"To me, that's the beauty of this work. It's honest," Mulenburg said. "The viewer can see how raw it is — from its very beginnings all the way to the end. My progression is obvious, at least to me.

"Of course, art is subjective. One might like a particular style of a portrait, but not see it again in any of the other ones. Therefore, to that person, what they consider progression might be very different."

Each piece took between eight and 20 hours to paint. She used a magnifying glass.

Mulenburg started each portrait by finding the center of the painting, which was often the nose. Many of her subjects have interesting noses.

Having painted 100 portraits, Mulenburg learned she hates to paint ears and that the eyelid casts a shadow on the iris. She found herself drawn to people who wore hats.

"If you want to attract more attention than the person next to you, wear a hat." Mulenburg said. "After painting these little faces, I am absolutely convinced of that. Women in the 1940s knew that. They wore hats to attract men. When I was looking for the next subject, I was always drawn to the pictures that had hats." Mulenburg painted the background last and sometimes changed it. A dark background creates a completely different feeling than a light one for the same portrait, she said.

Her favorite portraits tend to be those of dark, moody or angry faces. She also likes wrinkled

visages

“This man’s wrinkles were the predominant feature of his face and could not be ignored,” she noted about one portrait. “Perhaps years of working outdoors or smoking contributed to them. I am not sure.

“If we are provided a life of longevity, we will all have these lines of knowledge and experience in our old age. They tell a story of their own. I do not consider them unsightly in any way. They are simply who we truly are as human beings.”

To keep the process simple, Mulenburg used primary colors — red, yellow, blue, green, black and white — creating different hues by mixing colors or applying paints thicker or thinner.

Mulenburg encouraged artists to experiment with brushes and techniques.

“Painting involves having a relationship with your brush,” she wrote in one posting. “Although an artist’s hand controls the brush, the paint’s behavior with fluidity, pressure, color, angle and movement is a complicated process. It’s interactive and highly receptive to experimentation.

“Don’t be afraid. Move that brush on your canvas in a new way and try different applications. It will keep your technique from getting stale.”

Mulenburg, who has a degree in journalism but prefers writing for herself, took her first art class — an introduction to drawing and composition — her senior year in college.

“It was basic. We worked only in black and white with pen, pencil and black cow marker (oil markers actually used to mark cows),” she said.

Mulenburg discovered she enjoyed drawing, and her teacher was encouraging. She became a graphic artist, working in Minneapolis, Chicago and Texas before moving to Port Washington in 2006.

“I never considered that creative,” she said of her commercial work. “It was doing what other people wanted. I got very fast at it.”

Mulenburg quit in 2010 to help her mother and be with her father as he was dying, traveling between Port and New London.

Mulenburg turned to painting to deal with what was happening.

“Some call it art therapy. I’m not sure if that’s what it was, but it helped,” she said.

Her first painting was a black-and-white oil of people walking along the icy breakwater to the lighthouse in Port Washington. Her second painting was a lone fishing pole lying on a pier.

Mulenburg usually paints from photographs she's taken. She has done many paintings of birds, from fluffed up juncos to stately herons, and numerous landscapes, particularly of Port Washington and Lake Michigan.

She avoided portraits until undertaking100 faces.

Although she's not sure she's developed her style yet, Mulenburg is no longer afraid to paint faces.

To view Mulenburg's work, visit her web site www.beccamulenburg.com.

Image Information: Becca Mulenburg held a few of her 100 portraits that will be exhibited at Gallery 224 in Port Washington. Photo by Sam Arendt