

September 6, 2009

Artist turns her lens on people of Oshkosh

*By Patricia Wolff
of The Northwestern*

Photographs of the hands of Oshkosh-area residents depicted as symbols of community, strength and human connectedness drive home a powerful message as portrayed by fine arts photographer Suzanne Rose.

Her works, images shot in black and white, can be seen through October at the Atrium at Mercy Medical Center and as a complement to the "Seeing Ourselves: Masterpieces of American Photography from George Eastman House Collections" exhibit at the Paine Art Center and Gardens.

Rose, a Wisconsin native who was educated at the Art Institute of Chicago and now lives in Door County with her artist husband Jim Rose and their daughter, is nearing the end of her year-long residency at the Paine.

The artist-in-residency program is an attempt to add another layer of education to the art center's offerings through a real person who becomes connected to the community, said Paine Executive Director Aaron Sherer.

Rose is the third artist-in-residence in a series.

Her journal entries on the Paine's Web site are often eloquent as they describe her focus on Oshkosh and its people for the past year. At the start of her journey last fall she wrote, "I plan to let myself just discover Oshkosh, taking stock, exploring the city with fresh eyes, getting to know the lay of the land ... all the while looking for poetry behind every hedge, around every corner and behind every door..."

Rose explored the city, stopping often at Menominee Park at daybreak for inspiration and photo opportunities. She trudged through Riverside Cemetery and took her time to observe the streets, buildings and people of Oshkosh. She found beauty even in crumbling factories and abandoned buildings.

A special partnership between Affinity Health Systems at the Paine led to Rose's exhibit of 22 photographs that fill the wall space at Mercy's Atrium.

"Mercy gave me the very loose theme of 'well being,'" Rose said. "They opened their doors and said I could photograph anything."

She explored the hospital basement to the top floor and settled on her plan to photograph the hands of doctors, nurses and volunteers.

"Hands are a powerful tool we use to weave and build and grow in mind, body and spirit," she said.

Rose was inspired by photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who photographed the hands of artist Georgia O'Keefe. In all, Rose photographed about 30 people, most connected to the hospital.

However, the collection also includes the hands of caregivers outside the medical realm. Her subjects included an artist, a horticulturist, a college instructor and a religious leader. Each subject is holding something indicative of his or her life's work. For example, Rose photographed a midwife who participates in water births as she lifted handfuls of water from a bucket and let them spill.

Sherer's hands are in the collection. Rose photographed him writing a letter, something he frequently does as director of the art center.

"It had to be real," he said.

Sherer was seated at the desk of Nathan Paine, original owner of the mansion in which the art center is housed at 1410 Algoma Blvd. He had no idea how much work would be involved.

"I kind of assumed it would take 10 to 15 minutes. It was closer to an hour," he said. "She shot four rolls of film with 12 exposures on each."

Because Rose uses only natural light and Sherer was seated in a dim room, she had to carefully set up the photos. When it came time to shoot the photos Rose would ask him to hold his breath.

"Even breathing makes hands tremor," Sherer said.

Even though many people shy away from having their faces photographed, they are generally more relaxed having their hands pictured. To put them even more at ease, Rose interviewed her subjects at length and felt she got to know them well prior to the photo shoots. The experience in Oshkosh helped Rose become a better photographer.

"I feel it was very powerful to interact with so many interesting people. I've grown," she said.

Additional Facts

At a glance

Fine arts photographer and artist-in-residence at the Paine Art Center and Gardens, Suzanne Rose's exhibits are at the Paine and the Atrium at Mercy Medical Center through October.

Read the artist's journal of her year in Oshkosh at www.thepaine.org

The artist will conduct a program for children and families from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 12, at the Paine Art Center and Gardens, 1410 Algoma Blvd. Call (920) 235-6903 for more.
