

NORTH WOODS SCHOOL

Creations reveal students' minds to the world

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FIELD TWP — If you're driving out in the countryside this spring or summer, there's a chance you might see something you didn't expect — a young woman seated in the back of a truck transmuting the landscape to acrylics on canvas.

"I really enjoy doing landscape paintings because it just brings a sense of calmness and beauty," said North Woods senior Olivia Udovich.

But here in the cold of winter, Udovich and the other students in art teacher Rachel Betterley's senior art class at North Woods have turned their creativity toward landscapes not so readily visible or easy to depict. They've been exploring how to represent the inner landscapes of their own unique thoughts and feelings through various styles of artistic expression.

Questioning

"I've always been a fan of the freedom of expression, the process of art and the meaning behind the art, not necessarily about it having to look a particular way," Betterley said. "I think that if you're more emotionally invested in the art, you're ultimately going to make better quality art. That's why a lot of my assignments stem from an overarching question, and the question has to be interpreted through their art."

The products of one recent assignment, on display in a glass case in the hallway, are fanciful flights of imagination as different and complex as the artists who created them.

"The question was, 'What is your inner world?'" Betterley said. "They had to try to interpret that question and showcase how their brain works, or how they view the world."

Creating

Little in life is black and white, but for this project that's all the students had to work with — a black Sharpie and white paper. Aside from a requirement that their work incorporate nine distinct

elements of artistic design, students were left to figure out what imagery might best reflect what goes on in their heads, with encouraging prompts from Betterley.

A tree with a huge trunk crowned with branches and leaves is a central figure situated between land, sea, and a starry sky, sprinkled with curious elements such as a space fish that reflects a world of impossibilities made possible in the mind of Trey Gibson.

"That tree is part of a much bigger world in your mind and how it can be so fascinating," Gibson said. "There are so many things that are impossible in our world, so many things that could be dreamed of and could be made a reality."

That theme is reflected in the artist's statement that accompanies Gibson's "Luvita," something each student is required to do that explains both the meaning behind the work and the technical aspects of how they used the nine design elements.

"There is a person in every plane in this artwork, and they are traveling in this big and expansive world, dealing with many situations that lay ahead," he wrote.

It's a far cry from the doodling Gibson said he once enjoyed, and now he's thinking about studying art, film, and perhaps literature in college.

Tensions

But the world is filled with challenges as well as possibilities, and many works reflect the anxieties often felt by high school seniors dealing with finding their way in social relationships, juggling responsibilities, and looking ahead to futures far different from what they've been accustomed to in school. Those anxieties also are expressed openly in their artist statements.

"You learn a lot about kids and their life in general in their statements," Betterley said. "Some that look like they have it all together and seem fine, you read the statements and discover they're going through things, too. It kind of makes you take a step back. It's nice that they trust me enough to read

that. That's a big thing."

A unique feature of Timothy Lilya's piece is the incorporation of strong geometric elements, within which more fluid patterns and forms take shape. A vertical line splits the page and an oval abstract face in half, one side feeling cluttered and busy, the other conveying a sense of serenity and calm.

"This is sort of like day and night," Lilya explained. "There's the busier side of life. Then there's a sort of peaceful kind of place, where we don't really go in reality, but we want to go in our imagination."

It's that busy side of the page that provides a window into one of Lilya's concerns as a senior.

"I knew last year that I was going to be making more decisions this year, but I didn't realize the weight it would have on my future," he said. "Like choosing the right college and getting the right degree to get the right job and make a living trying to live your life outside of school. Just going to school every day is easy, it's like a routine. A break from that routine, graduating, and not knowing what to do outside is kind of scary. It really freaks me out."

Contemplating "The Unhinged Sky" by Udovich is an exercise in discerning elements bold and discrete, simple and complex, familiar and bizarre. Whether it is the tentacles emanating from a compartmentalized head, binoculars dangling from a crescent-shaped moon, or tiny winged keys likely to elude a casual glance, all of it comes together to speak to some aspect of thought or anxiety.

"The concept is life being crazy and you trying to reach up and finding that calm, trying to do everything to find the key to the problem," Udovich said. "All people have that sort of stuff somewhere in their head. They just don't necessarily show it. It's cool that I can take my emotions and thoughts and channel them into something that's productive."

This form of expres-



North Woods senior Timothy Lilya used contrasting motifs to visually reveal the struggle between activity and serenity in his inner world.

sion is a big but rewarding departure from the world of painting the natural world, Udovich said.

"I've never created stuff like this before, never dug that deep," she said. "It's almost like therapy."

Translating the inner world of thoughts and feelings to paper and ink was a challenge for Sierra Jensen. The common stresses of life and the added concerns of life after graduation were all too familiar, but finding a direction was elusive at first.

"It was like everything was kind of off, it wasn't working," Jensen said. "I wanted to give up on it quite a few times, but then I just kind of pushed through it. My actual piece is so different from what I originally had planned."

What emerged was something distinctly different from all the rest. Central to Jensen's piece is a cartoonish figure with a panicked expression who is frantically sprinting up a spiral staircase of thin glass panels in space, shattering with each pounding footstep. Sands draining through an hourglass complete the theme

of "I've Got No Time," a condition described in clear detail in Jensen's artist statement.

"I suppose it represents how my mental health has plummeted within these past months since school started," she wrote. "I feel like I'm always running out of time and I'm running from my paranoia (but it never goes away). The space theme could represent how sleep deprived I am. I never really do get much sleep, worrying about too many things."

And as Jensen talked about her work, it sounded as if she's been pushing through those emotions, too. Everyone has moments of feeling overwhelmed; it's clear that art, both visual and performing, not only helps with those times but will be integral to her professional goals.

"I'm just a creative person in general," she said. "I sing a little, I have a keyboard and a guitar. I want to go into both art and music. I plan to do animated stuff but also incorporate my own things into it."

Support

Not surprisingly, the revelations that come through students' art and artist statements resonate with Betterley on an interpersonal level.

"When I read stuff that's really intense, I'll kind of internalize it," she said. "Then I'm like, OK, what can I do to help this particular student continue to feel like they can reach their potential? I try to be a little more personal and positive."

Patience and positivity have been important for students who have experienced the social disruptions brought on by the pandemic. Sharing thoughts and emotions wasn't automatic when students returned to school this year, but over time Betterley has built a climate of trust and acceptance that is now paying dividends.

"It's a pretty open place to just do whatever you want and no one's going to judge you for it," Lilya said. "It's your own ideas, your own thoughts and opinions, and nobody talks down to each other."

Currently, the class is studying the art of surrealism, and their project is to showcase an anxiety they have in surrealist style. Similar projects to connect students' inner worlds with artistic expression will follow.

"It's getting them to not be afraid of their own thoughts, no matter what it is, and finding a way to interpret that," Betterley said. "What these assignments do is pretty much to make them have to be authentic. A lot of them have things that are really deep. I feel like I'm there to help them along the journey, more like a mentor than a teacher saying do this, do this, do this."

"It's kind of like a roller coaster," Betterley said. "But ultimately, art helps them kind of ride that roller coaster a little bit easier."



"Luvita" by Trey Gibson



"I've Got No Time" by Sierra Jensen



"The Unhinged Sky" by Olivia Udovich