

Sunday

WOMEN'S JOURNAL

Painter tries to capture 'inner life' of her subjects, 3



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Michele Rushworth
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Capturing the human spirit

Painter Michele Rushworth's portraits convey much more than simply what the subject looks like

By Carole Beers
Journal Reporter

Michele Rushworth, who listens to Mozart as she paints luminous oils of the known and unknown at her Sammamish Plateau home, was amused after looking up the etymology of the word "portrait."

"When you see a beautiful portrait," Rushworth says, "can you imagine the French origins of the word mean 'to drag (something) forth'?"

But it's apt, she says, indicating the effort that goes into something that looks fairly effortless.

She works to understand her subjects — who can be as familiar as one of her own two adopted Chinese daughters, or as famous as former Washington Gov. Gary Locke, or retired Pacific Northwest Ballet directors Kent Stowell and Francia Russell.

She also shoots photos of them.

Then she studies their bodies, measures their facial features using calipers, and finally takes paintbrush to palette to lay color, shadow and light onto Belgian canvas (like Rembrandt used) to portray her subjects, which can take weeks, even months.

When she's done, she's captured their essence.

The ways it pays

The \$4,000 to \$15,000 such efforts command doesn't cover her work.

But she's in it for far more: She's in it for what it "drags" out of her.

"I believe there's no higher art form than the difficult challenge of capturing the

human spirit, of conveying something of the inner life and depth of a person's character on canvas," she said. "A camera (shows) us what a person looks like, but my aim ... is to go far beyond a mere surface."

With Locke's official portrait, to be hung this fall in the State Capitol Building, Rushworth is trying to show "the warmth and integrity of his character and his quiet confidence."

Everyone knows what Locke looks like, but it's her task "to go beyond that, and show future generations something of his spirit, and what he stood for as a leader."

With the Stowell-Russell double portrait, she sought to show Stowell's warm kindness and mischievous twinkle, as well as Russell's appraising elegance.

Of this portrait, now hanging in the Phelps Center, PNB headquarters, Russell wrote to Rushworth:

"We expected the high level of skill for which you are known, but did not anticipate how beautifully your imagination and your intuition would work together."

"Many of our artists and staff have (told) us they look at the portrait several times every day and have the sense that we are still with them. What better proof could there be that your work has achieved, or rather surpassed, the original goal of maintaining our presence at Pacific Northwest Ballet."

Making it happen

Rushworth always knew she was an artist; drawing was her first love.

But she had to find her



Peter Horvitz/Journal

Retired Pacific Northwest Ballet directors Francia Russell, left, and Kent Stowell pose near the portrait of them that hangs at PNB headquarters. Michele Rushworth, center, painted the portrait, which was unveiled in June.

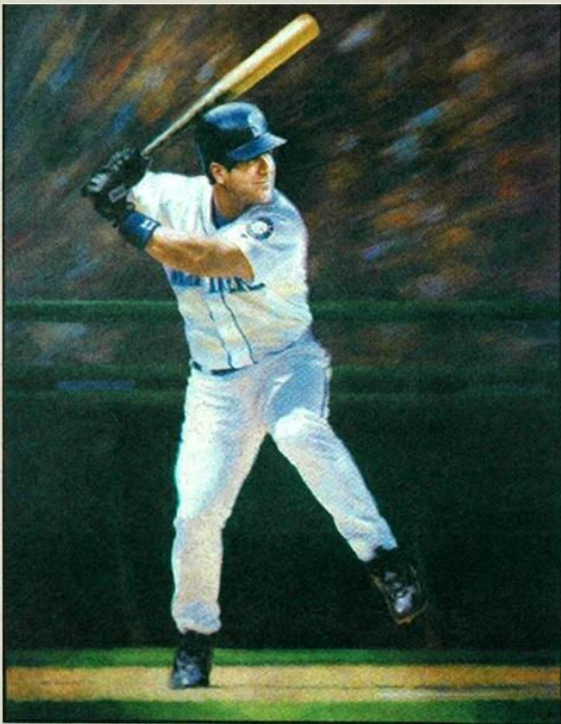
own way. Studying at Queen's University and the Ontario College of Art in Canada in the 1970s, she found art courses only on abstract and conceptual art — styles she found alien.

"With the recent resurgence in realism in the art world, such training is becoming easier to find," she said. "But back then only the most dedicated artists could learn the traditional methods."

She wanted classical instruction in drawing and painting. So she improved her skills via workshops, books and practice. She



See RUSHWORTH, Page 4 A portrait of two children.



This portrait of former Seattle Mariners slugger Edgar Martinez was unveiled before 40,000 fans last fall at Safeco Field.

'I work on getting precise, sharp detail as far as the face. Away from the face, for the background, you get softer strokes, to call attention to the face.'

MICHELE RUSHWORTH



Patrick Hagerty/Journal

Michele Rushworth works in her home studio on a landscape painting of a beach in Mexico she visited while on a recent vacation.

Rushworth

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studied paintings by Rembrandt and John Singer Sargent, trying to capture the life and elegance they conveyed.

Her first commissioned portraits came straight out of high school some 20 years ago — including one large mural with 30 portraits. She continued portraiture beyond college.

Later she branched out into still lifes and landscapes

that have been shown in national juried exhibitions, and sold at East Coast galleries.

Recent years have brought Rushworth well-deserved recognition.

A year after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, she showed her painting of a firefighter on the national CBS program "The Early Show."

In the fall of 2004, her portrait of Seattle Mariners slugger Edgar Martinez was unveiled at Safeco Field before 40,000 fans.

"I certainly did enjoy the

painting ... (and) thought it was magnificent," commented baseball commissioner Bud Selig.

In June, her Stowell-Russell portrait was unveiled, to raves, in McCaw Hall prior to the last performance of the season.

Now Rushworth is busy on several projects in her airy atelier at home.

"I work on getting precise, sharp detail as far the face," she said, showing how she moves in for a stroke, then steps back to eye the effect, then steps close again. "Away from the face, for the background, you get softer strokes, to call attention to the face."

She likes to do people painting in the morning, under serene conditions, so she can fully focus.

In the afternoon, she often does backgrounds and landscapes, for which she puts on lively music, such as The Beach Boys.

When done with a piece, she'll put a piece away for a week, then take it out to see it with a fresh eye, and make final touches — although, she admits, a painting is never really done.

"Watching me paint," she quips, "is like watching paint dry."