
REVIEW

‘Aurora Sojourn’ captures essence of Scandinavia



BY JANE G. COLLINS . Special to The Sumter Item

Norway, Iceland and Denmark have always seemed very far away to me, yet Jen Pepper’s “Aurora Sojourn” captures the essence of much of those countries. Because there were few people in her photographs, the viewer is directed to the colorful yet seeming isolation of those areas. The extremely informative bio sheet for this Sumter County Cultural Commission-supported exhibit stresses several important elements in Pepper’s artistic vision and its relationship to her stay in those three countries.

“Paintings Pictured Here,” her one shot included from Denmark, sets the tone for her close relationship between each of the countries, their artistic collaborations with Pepper and her desire to use those pieces to correlate the closeness of the countries’ architecture, color and surroundings. The photograph establishes the exploratory nature of a lone person dressed in a signature Shetland wool design titled “Paintings Pictured Here,” a knit cape inspired by the roof lines of homes in Denmark. Worn by artist Paivi Pussila of Finland, one of the many friends Pepper met on her residencies, and knit by Bolette Mohr Sillassen of Denmark, the figure heads down a tree-lined path that both frames and leads the figure onward. The actual item stands on a mannequin near the entrance. Her other “performative objects,” also on dress forms, celebrate the intricate designs of the regions.

“Development of Colour Ranges through the Ages,” a garment knit and crocheted by Pepper and Icelander Aslaug Ott, gathers its emphasis from a “colour paint chart” exploring the basic four colors of the cave drawings as they progressed through Egyptian, Greek, Italian, 18th and 19th to the 20th century. Pepper uses the garment in several pictures that lead the eye from the person wearing it to the surroundings. The fascinating native- knitted Hardangerfjord, a coat-like form comprising several established native Norwegian patterns that takes the contour shape of the Norwegian fjord, appears in several photographs of people titled “How to Wear a Hardangerfjord,” compositions designed to underscore the close harmony of the people to their homeland.

I use the word “composition” since it highlights Pepper’s interest in the often abstract nature of geographic forms and her artistic eye that captures the design and color in each picture. They are not mere photographs but visual statements about the surroundings. “Geo-thermal Plant” (Iceland) is like a Thomas Hart Benton painting. Large sections appear to undulate into one another, forming a smooth, almost un-natural emphasis of form and design. Her houses from Norway and Iceland pile color against design, using almost secretive close-ups of village buildings and sensitive contrasts of blue sky, clouds and spreading tree branches to reveal blue, ochre, cream and red structures. Works like “Along the Ring Road” and the hauntingly austere “Dormant Volcano from Vegetation” with its emphatic gray and dung coloring and deep fissures articulate the atmosphere. Her video, featuring the hot sulphur springs, so hot that even rocks melt, documents the varied scenery and emphasizes the natural beauty of the territory.

“The Weight of Mountains,” Pepper’s original ink-and- graphite drawings, relate well to her interest in the changing nature of water and environment and the “ fleeting processes that cannot be fixed and are virtually impossible to harness.” They juxtapose color against color and fluid forms that morph and move. Her two yellow pencil, graphite, ink gouache on handmade paper paintings, “Weight of Mountains” and “House in the Woods,” celebrate her ability to capture the transient essence of form, color and design.

Her three-month stay was, in her own words, a “wonderful experience,” allowing her to make diverse friends and explore the unplanned discoveries of her environment. Yet her time translates into an excellent opportunity for those who have not traveled to those northern areas to savor the terrain, physical appearance and fascinating atmosphere of those countries.

Image, Jen Pepper talks to art lovers attending the opening reception for her exhibition “Aurora Sojourn” at Gallery 135 in Patriot Hall on Thursday night. Pepper created the work during a three-month residency in Norway, Iceland and Denmark. It will remain in the gallery through Aug. 14.

SEE THE EXHIBIT “Aurora Sojourn” by Jen Pepper will remain at Patriot Hall Gallery 135, 135 Haynsworth St., from July 16 through Aug. 14. Hours of operation are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information, call (803) 436-2260