

Arts & Entertainment

Julie Speed brings 'Bible Studies' show to Rowan



Photo by Calista Condo

Julie Speed's "Bible Studies" was an interesting show that brought students and non-students alike to Westby Hall.

By Calista Condo
Photo Editor

Until April 7, Westby Art Gallery will be showcasing the work of an artist whose first career choices were caveman and pirate when she was little. Julie Speed, born in Chicago in 1951, came to the realization at the age of six or seven that she could not realistically be a caveman or pirate, so she reluctantly opted for art.

"I almost always knew I would be an artist," said Speed, who has had many other careers beside artist, caveman and pirate. Speed, a life-long artist, did not make art her career until 1978 when she moved to Texas and opened a studio.

This art school dropout, who has had numerous art exhibits around the country, has a show titled "Bible Studies," now in Westby Gallery. It is titled "Bible Studies" because, according to Speed, it happened to start off with a 19th century Swedish Bible that she bought as scrap paper. She emphasizes that there is no message in her work. Speed says she just follows the thread — the process of

her thoughts. It's up to the viewer to give the piece meaning.

"I work a lot and think a little," said Speed.

Speed's influences are varied and very numerous. Among her influences are Australian aboriginal art, Russian and Byzantine works, fairy tale illustrations and artists like Balthus, Degas and Bruegel the Elder.

Her exhibit in Westby consists of eight colorful pieces that show Speed's sheer talent as an artist. Speed's paintings are multimedia pieces that incorporate black and white gouache, bright ink, pencil, sepia gouache and imagery and text from her Swedish Bible and other books. The images from the Bible were originally scanned and then placed on to a transparent film.

Speed then took the film and burned it on to a solar plate. She would cut out the images and place them on the painting and then she would use the sepia gouache to edit or touch up the images. She also uses a water-misting bottle to spray the backgrounds of her pieces with ink, often mixing colors or allowing drips to fall on the piece.

A few of the pieces titled "Variations" were a product of Speed adding different pieces to the painting. According to the artist's statement, she was having fun in the process and kept changing her pieces. Each one took on a life of its own just by the tweaking of one or two elements — for example, the background colors or the images from the body. One painting takes about two months from start to finish, according to Speed.

Many of her pieces are portraits and many of them include a third eye. This third eye serves two purposes for Speed. She feels that many people think several things at once. By including a third eye on the women in her portraits, she is able to show several expressions on one face. She also sees the third eyes as a way of questioning the mind.

"It is our ingrained assumptions, the ones so old and so deep that we don't even know they are there that are the worst enemies of logic and insight," Speed wrote on her website, <http://juliespeed.com>. She is saying that the third eye is more like the mind which acts like a third eye in theory.

While Speed can explain the processes of her work and how her pieces come about, the reaction from Rowan helps explain the aesthetics.

Lisa Hatchadoorian, the director of the Westby Gallery, chose Speed's work for her last show as the gallery director because of its quality.

"She works in a lot of difficult mediums. I choose the best artist I see ... I thought it would be interesting to share with the community of Rowan," said Hatchadoorian, who is leaving Rowan to work at the Nicolaysen Museum in Wyoming.

Speed's work is very detailed while very creative and imaginative. Her mixed mediums and perfect choice of imagery gives a varied response of what is actually going on in the painting. There is no one meaning, no one story being told.

"It looks really simple, and then you get up close and you don't know what is going on," said senior geography major Dot McKee.

Art history professor Dr. Fred Adelson, better known to students as "Doc," feels that the works are handsomely done and there is great craftsmanship in the way the pieces were executed.

"There is meticulous detail and she has a great understanding of the medium," said Adelson. "She plays the realistic qualities against the abstract qualities."

Speed's work is well organized and thought out. The composition is solid and each component is well placed. She incorporates such realistic detail to emphasize the abstract components of each piece. She allows all of this to compose a person full of insight and mystery — a person the viewer cannot quite figure out. While Speed claims she has no message to send, the viewer of her works is overwhelmed with underlying symbolism and meaning.

Dean of Fine and Performing Arts, Donald Gephardt, feels that the work is technically composed and is excellent in production, but the emphasis for him is on the statement of the artist.

"The artist is showing their view of the world," Gephardt said. "We always say 'did you enjoy the play or show?' and sometimes 'enjoy' is the wrong word. If something is sad or tragic, I don't enjoy it, but it moves me in a specific way. That is the value. Art can be a more meaningful, longer lasting experience."