

The Easton Irregular

the good news newspaper easton, pa

GIVING BACK IS A WORK OF ART

by Christine Lake

A new art exhibition is aiming to use the power of the visual arts to bring the face of volunteerism into clearer focus. In the new *BLACK—VOLUNTEERISM*, artist D Nina Cruz uses a unique medium as the entry point into stories of 14 local volunteers, to give the act of volunteering a voice of its own. The free show opened to the public at SteelStacks on September 3 and runs until October 29.

Though the economic climate of the past decade may make it seem that self-preservation is the right strategy, Cruz offers a different antidote. "In today's culture, you need to talk to people who look different than you, or eat different foods than you," she says. "Getting outside of yourself, giving of ourselves is important." There's research to back up her assertions. Volunteering strengthens community, but it also strengthens the volunteer's social network by offering connections; social interactions of this type improve brain function, lower risk of depression and anxiety, and bolster the immune system. Giving, whether of time or funds, also allows us to participate in the things we deem important. It's a statement to the world that we believe in a cause, and living in such an outward manner allows us to further connect with our values. "Anything that you think is holding you back from volunteering really isn't," states Cruz. "I wanted to show that anyone can volunteer, because these likenesses and bios really span the spectrum of real life circumstances."

A lifelong artist, Cruz recently settled on the New Jersey/Pennsylvania border. "I moved a lot growing up, and that shaped me," she explains. "I was always the new kid in school, so I had to learn to move past fear to reach out to people." A little stressed with home improvements, volunteering gave Cruz a way to stop focusing on herself and to help others with the same need. She started with Habitat for Humanity Lehigh Valley, volunteering and then working part-time for five months while also working another full time job. For the group's big fundraiser auction, A Toast to Hope in 2015, Cruz repurposed a door into a coffee table. "It turned out well, but it needed something," she says. "I thought, 'I'm an artist, I can do something with this!' and as I looked at the piece it just cried out for a bloom." Having worked with wood stain during her time with Habitat LV, she envisioned a painting on the door made entirely with wood stain. "I didn't know if I could pull it off, would the stain obey?" Cruz recalls. It did obey, and the door/coffee table turned out so well, even Minwax noticed and featured it on their social media.

Around the same time, Cruz was working on an idea for a series of paintings inspired by her time with the core volunteers of Habitat LV, turning volunteer benefits into art. Originally, she planned to work in watercolors, but the coffee table creation changed that. The SteelStacks location was already booked for the exhibition, so she had a good idea of the size and number of paintings needed. With over a dozen to paint, time would be a factor. "Watercolor is a medium that I'm very familiar with, so I ran the risk of getting a little too detailed with the likenesses, using up valuable time," says Cruz. "Working with wood stain afforded me less familiarity with the

medium, thus distracting from implementing detail in the entire painting." This isn't to say that the portraits are lacking in detail, but the details are purposefully in the face and eyes. Cruz used fine brushes and translucent layers of wood stain to create life-like subjects viewers can relate to.

The scope for her vision also grew. "I realized that I had to represent all different ages, different genders, different interests," Cruz relays. "This would allow those experiencing the exhibition to relate to these real volunteers. No excuses—if the real people featured can get past challenges of time, money, ability and fear, then so can you." Fortunately, being a dedicated volunteer herself, she had other groups to use as connections. "First, I asked the organizations if I could approach their volunteers to be a part of this project as individuals. Then it was up to the person," she says. Volunteers from America's Grow-a-Row, in Pittstown, NJ and Southridge Community Church in Clinton, NJ stepped up to round out the subjects. "The heart and soul of this project are the Bios of the volunteers. The reasons why they integrate volunteering into their lives and what they have gained are what I really want people to see," says Cruz. "The likenesses draw you in, then I hope people will read the Bios and decide that life is richer when you give—when you volunteer." Cruz is also hoping that viewers will share the love by taking their favorite portraits/Bios and share them widely on social media with the hashtag #newblackvol. The exhibit includes a QR code that will take you to the project website where you can explore the bios and mission of the show in depth. There is also a feedback form, and all attendees are encouraged to leave their feedback of what spoke to them, what moved them, and how it changed them. After October, Cruz is intending to make this a travelling exhibit, to get the message of volunteerism out to the world.

"Whatever it is that bothers you in this world, you're meant to do something about that. This show is my something," explains Cruz. "We need to get out of ourselves! Be open, go give and serve. You're the answer to something out there, and there's no shortage of need for your talents, whatever they may be."

the new BLACK—VOLUNTEERISM is free and open to the public at the ArtsQuest Center at SteelStacks, 101 Founders Way in Bethlehem, PA. Hours are: Monday-Wednesday 3:30-6:00 PM; Thursday & Friday 4-6 PM; Saturday 11 AM-6 PM and Sun 12-6 PM. More information on the event can be found at www.cruzcreate.com/show.html.



A piece from the exhibit the new BLACK—VOLUNTEERISM by artist D Nina Cruz, on view at SteelStacks thru October 29.

Inside



Artist Profile page 10



Irregular Eats page 16



A piece from the exhibit the new BLACK—VOLUNTEERISM by artist D Nina Cruz, on view at SteelStacks thru October 29.



Artist D Nina Cruz poses in front of the pieces from her exhibit the new BLACK—VOLUNTEERISM, on view at SteelStacks thru October 29.