

Beauty between the lines

Aging faces, worn bodies and known souls are Megan Moore's inspiration

PREVIEW

By MICHAEL MOORE
of the Missoulian

Missoula painter Megan Moore's work will be shown Jan. 9 through March 3 at the "Faces of Artists" exhibition at the Hockaday Museum of Art in Kalispell. A public reception is scheduled for Friday, Jan. 19. For more information, go to www.hockadayeuseum.org/exhibit.htm, or visit Megan Moore's Web site at www.meganmoore.net.

The painter Megan Moore lives amidst the soaring beauty of the Northern Rockies, but it doesn't really register.

She sees it, of course, the immense mountains, the white froth of funneled rivers, the grand stands of ponderosa. But it leaves her unmoved. It's too big, somehow too sterile, despite its

ecological complexity

And yet Moore is not immune to beauty. Her field of vision is just narrowed. Not limited, mind you, but focused.

Beauty is just outside the door of her small home in the university neighborhood. It's the luminescent skin of an old man down the street. It's the woman who is perhaps carrying a few more pounds than she'd like.

It's the jutting, angular nose that's just a smidge oversized.

In a word, it's the unexpected. Moore, who has come to painting as an occupation a bit late in life, is immune to cliché, to the sentimental, to the cultural norm of beauty.

"I guess I feel very different from most people who live here in Missoula," she said. "I don't want this to sound harsh, but I'm not really here for the land, for what people call this gorgeous piece of nature. I'm on a smaller scale, I think. On the other hand,

I do feel a huge privilege to live where I live."

Megan Moore paints portraits. She is not well known, but that may soon change. She has a show opening at the Hockaday Gallery in Kalispell on Friday, she's had a small show in Paris, and she's won a handful of art awards that have broadened the art world's knowledge of her work. She's also recently finished her first major commission piece.

Moore's paintings are large pieces, often done on embossed paper that gives them the feeling of shimmering movement. The colors are generally muted and subdued, forcing the viewer to more intimately engage the faces, which seem to glow as if lit by some inner force.

More than anything, the paintings are intense in a way that art often isn't. What the viewer might find vaguely discomforting, Moore finds beautiful.

The paintings are often of acquaintances, friends of friends, neighbors, the occasional person she has simply seen and remained fascinated by. She is drawn by their physical presences, but also appears attracted by some unseen, ineffable quality in her subjects.

In an upcoming article about her in the *The Artist* magazine, she describes her artistic goal in terms that might seem grandiose and oh-so-artsy until you realize that she really means it on a fundamental level: "My intention is much deeper: to declare the holiness and mystery of each individual."

Or put another way: "One of the people I painted, his wife told me, 'You really get him.' That's really interesting to me, in part because it might appear to be true but mostly because it's quite likely impossible," she said. "It's the most serious thing to me, but it's also lines on paper."

Megan Moore is 44 and she did not come to painting quickly. She had a "vague interest" in painting when she went off to college at Sarah Lawrence College just north of New York City. An art professor there cured her of her interest.

"He was just so intimidating, he just sent me running from there," she said.

Moore went on to study humanities at the New School for Social Research, and took the chance to take some drawing classes at the Parsons School of Design in New York City.

Years later, while living in Paris, she tried to take advantage of the city's prestigious yet affordable public art schools, but learned that at age 30, she was too old.

Moore lived around both the country and the world, taking up residence on both U.S. coasts as well as Paris and Rome. Along the way, she married and divorced. She also learned the art of massage while living in Albuquerque about 15 years ago.

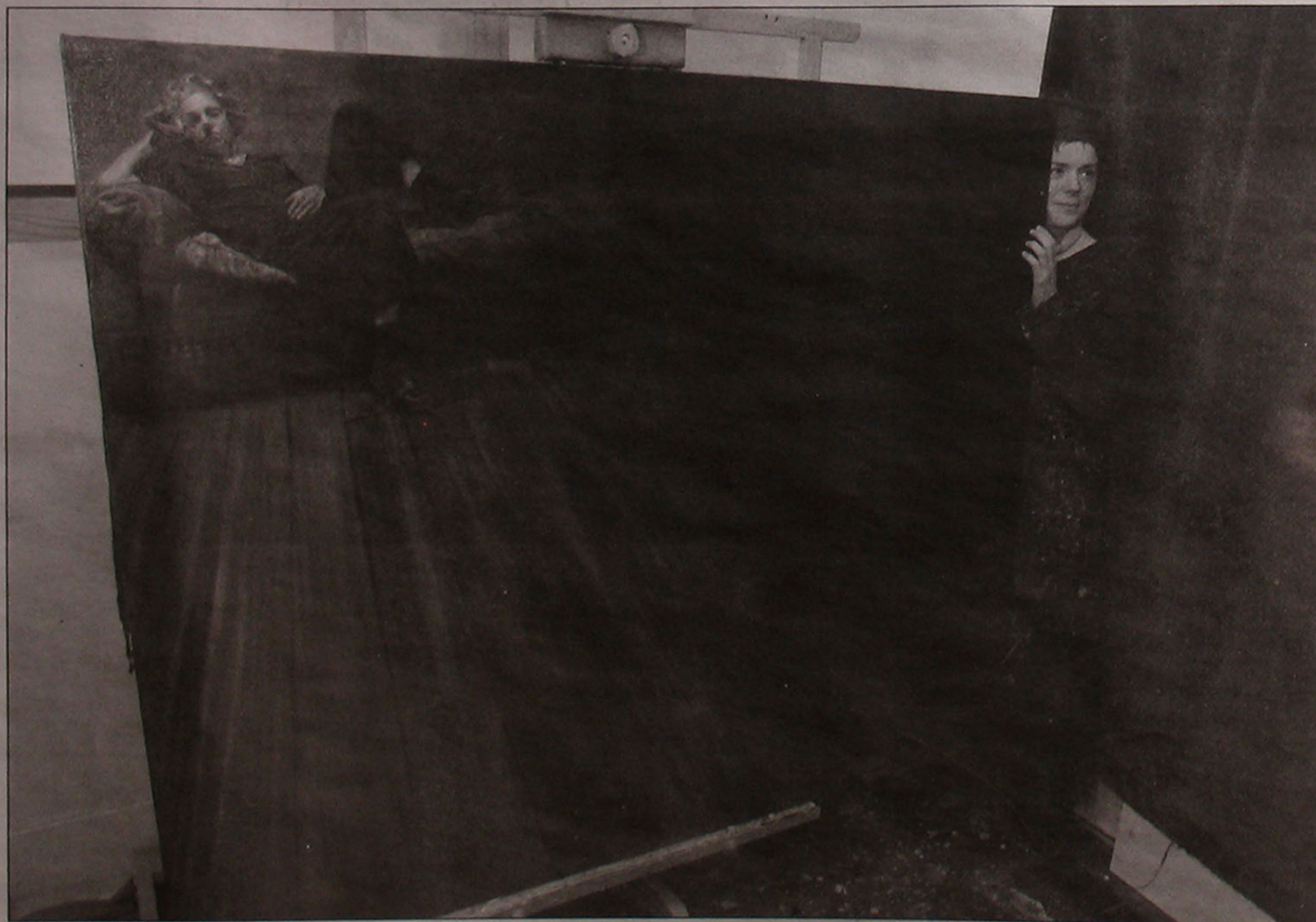
Her stint in Paris followed quickly, and she developed a thriving massage practice that paid the bills while she soaked up life in France.

After Paris came Rome and after Rome came, well, Missoula.

"The reason I came here is that my mother is here, and after a while away, you get this feeling that you want to be close to family," Megan said. "Now she's just down the street, and there's something very comforting about that."

When she came to Missoula seven years ago, Moore still nursed her interest in painting, so she took a class at the University of Montana from art professor Marilyn Bruya. That class worked in the way the Sarah Lawrence class failed.

"Marilyn never judged anything as good or bad," Moore



TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Megan Moore stands by one of her portraits, a family acquaintance from New York City. Working from photographs, Moore paints portraits that often don't gloss over some of life's rougher edges.



said. "She never praised anybody and she never criticized anybody. She was so nonjudgmental, I guess I felt like she was giving me permission to paint."

It was also the case that Moore showed a talent early on. She continued her studies with Missoula painter Jim Todd, and eventually came to believe that she was finally doing what she was supposed to be doing with her life.

"I just felt all filled up with the work," she said. "I had this sense of wholeness, of fulfilling something inside me."

Massage – "I gave away a lot of massages in building my business!" – continued to pay the bills while she learned her craft, but a bout with thyroid cancer in 2002 created a downturn in the massage business that she filled with painting.

Now, she says, "I am painting even when I am not painting."



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Moore does not work quickly. She's spent months on a piece, only to find something so badly lacking that she's painted out the entire canvas.

Recently, she spent nearly a year doing a commissioned painting for a friend of a friend. The piece, which started with a honeymoon photograph from 1951, is done, but Moore hasn't shown it to the woman

who commissioned it.

Because her work is forceful and edgy, she's often worried about how her subjects will respond to the paintings. Simply put, she worried that her "vision" of her subjects might not match their own view of themselves.

"This is where we get back into the whole thing of whether I, as the painter, 'get' them," she said. "I have the sense that there may be something communicated between the artist and the subject, but my real sense is that the emotion and feeling of a piece has to

come from something I'm carrying inside myself."

Moore works from photographs. The idea of sitting with a subject for hours strikes her as "too intense."

"Not for them, but for me," she said, laughing.

There's something comforting to Moore in the inherent contradiction of her work – the quest to connect with the subject, while acknowledging the literal appearance her own emotional involvement in the painting.

"That seems to embody the complexity of the world," she

said. "That's the way we experience one another, as both individuals and as a sort of partnership you create when you interact with somebody else. It becomes more than just the two of you."

That alliance becomes Moore's work.

"I think that what I'm trying to show is a lived life," she said. "I want it to show something that is meaningful, that is authentic, that is deeply and truly human."

Sometimes, what is truly human is that great amalgam that we all are – fear, greed,

empathy, love, lust, dream, wonder and hope.

Megan Moore wants to render those emotions in color, in lines that move the viewer to look more fully at the life on the canvas and the lives beyond and behind it.

"I want to strip away pretense and see what lies behind," she said. "There's this vitality that animates us all. I want that to be my painting."

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