

Scene and Herd: Art, far from home

Posted by Gosia Wozniacka, The Oregonian March 05, 2009 10:24AM

Art can nurture people who are far from home; it can help express loss, belonging, change. Yet there are few, if any, venues in Portland where you can see art by Oregon artists born outside the United States, or hear writers from diverse cultures and continents read their works.

Colored Pencils Arts and Culture Night, held last week at the [Center for Intercultural Organizing](#), just filled that void. The event kicked off a monthly art show and open mike featuring Portland area immigrant and refugee artists and writers. It will take place every last Friday of the month at CIO.

"This will be our own place, where we will sing and read poetry from our hearts. A place where we can be us," said organizer [Nim Xuto](#). "So we can always remember ourselves. So we can preserve our cultures and share them."

Xuto, an artist from Thailand who lives in Southeast Portland, is a member of the Colored Pencils arts collective, a group of immigrant writers and artists. The collective -- along with CIO, Portland's Office of Human Rights, and the United Way -- organized the event because newcomer artists seldom showcase their work. Many take regular jobs to survive in a new country. Others fear bringing families into expensive galleries or smoke-filled bars.

"I've been here for 20 years, and whenever I participated in group art shows I was the only immigrant, the only person of color," Xuto said. "I wanted to find a place for us to do our art."

Last Friday's event gathered people of different races and cultures, including a very eclectic array of writers and artists. The art was colorful and affordable, the food -- Indonesian cuisine -- delicious, and the crowd abuzz about open mike performers. The art show featured both accomplished and novice artists, from countries including Jordan, Mexico, Thailand, Cameroon and Russia.

"[Cameroon](#) is a thousand miles away, and the only way I can bring home back to me is through my art," said Kwa Franklin Ghong, an artist who came from Cameroon to Oregon in 2002. His ink paintings featured African women. "My work is my home, that has now cured my homesickness."

Vladimir Kuznetsov, originally from Russia, now calls Gladstone home. He said the show will help people understand each other. Kuznetsov, who works as an electrician and paints large landscapes, has sold his art in Europe but seldom shows in Oregon.

The open mike also offered up strong emotions. Kilong Ung, a refugee from the Cambodian killing fields, read excerpts from his upcoming book "Golden Leaf," which recounts his family's harrowing experiences under the Khmer Rouge. Gauri Shanker Rajbaidya, who works in a Portland architecture firm, sang a contemporary Nepalese song. Mikhail Mitkov-Baklanovsky, a refugee from Ukraine, read about how his mother survived Soviet hyperinflation.

The next Colored Pencils Arts and Culture Night begins at 5:30 p.m. March 27, in the Center for Intercultural Organizing, 700 N. Killingsworth St. For details or to sign up: coloredpencils.usa@gmail.com



Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian
lese Recites a poem during Arts and Culture night at the Center for Intercultural Organizing