

Spirituality in the heart and bones of Rowan's "Ceremony"

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Rich Anderson

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Lyndsay Rowan has always collected natural objects: skulls, bones, feathers, rocks. She claims people visit her house and say it's like a natural history museum.

"I keep them for many reasons," the longtime artist and Jackson Hole resident said. "They make me feel like I am always in and surrounded by nature. I like to learn about and explore their biological nature and aesthetics. They hold memories — their own memories as well as my memories of a place or moment. They tell stories and share messages."

That goes especially for skulls, the featured medium in "Ceremony," Rowan's show at Shari Brownfield Fine Art.

"Skulls in the West, there are so many levels that we could get into here," Rowan said. "They represent sustenance as well as the complete opposite of that, and symbolically they feel like they capture that feeling of the Wild West, and of course there is also the 'Western aesthetic,' which incorporates activities like hunting, taxidermy."

Rowan loves to work with her art not just on a tactile level but also on an energetic level. She loves the unique, varied textures and the challenges that come with that.

"I can't erase or cover up a mistake," she said. "It's like a tattoo. I am honoring the individual animal, continuing its life in a way, as well as honoring nature as a whole."

Almost as if trying to channel the skull's origins, Rowan wants to recognize bison in particular, the skulls she is giving ceremony to in the show, because they are good vehicles for metaphor.

"The bison gives us sustenance, such as food, warmth, but they also represent symbolically/energetically the themes of abundance and manifestation, ancient wisdom, knowledge, death and renewal," Rowan said.

Death and renewal are important themes in "Ceremony," because whether the viewer realizes it or not, Rowan is playing with an age-old dialogue from the art world, the aesthetic of dying, otherwise known as memento mori.

Memento mori is a Latin phrase meaning “remember you must die.” Made popular in the 17th century, when most European populations were focused on life on Earth as only a preparation for the afterlife, the term was taken from the opening lines of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible and has remained a relevant conversation starter for creating and celebrating tension for modern art.

“I started working with the skulls as an art medium five years ago,” Rowan said. “My good friend and a creative producer in town, Jeff Stein, had asked a group of local artists to do art on skulls for a music festival. ... For me it was just an ‘aha’ moment, and I’ve been working with them ever since.”

Rowan has now completed close to 30 skulls, mostly bison, through she has also worked with elk, deer and some smaller animals. She said she is constantly exploring the balance between the physical and the spiritual, sharing the conversations that she encounters with the bones.

“The bones are like a form of ancient divination,” she said. “I am an artistic interpreter of nature.”

“Ceremony” is the first time she has created a body of work that wasn’t commissioned.

“When I do a commission for someone,” she said, “I am working with their energetic totems and intentions to drive the symbols and images. This time, I was creating the work for the community. ... for anyone to experience So I wanted to create a space that explored the natural elements and their energies.”

Rowan said the pieces are infused with healing energies, and the symbols are activated with ceremonies. The skulls all explore concepts of cycles, balances, masculine and feminine relationships, and polarities such as sun/moon, physical/spiritual, grounded/celestial, art/science.

“There are so many ways that art can inspire and educate us,” she said. “And I think art that explores and connects us to nature in a different way is so very important. It makes us aware of how connected we really are, and how important it is to listen to, honor and take care of nature, earth and all of its inhabitants.

“We are all connected. ... We can all hear and see the messages that are being shared with us if we just take a moment to slow down, listen and love.”

Physically, Rowan embeds her work with a variety of materials and details, including sacred geometry, minerals, gemstones and, in some cases, fossils. Skulls being skulls and not paper or canvas, present unique challenges.

“From the materials that I use (I go through a lot of pens) to the uneven, varied surface,” she said. “I can’t erase my mistakes or make changes once I start making my marks in pen. And it takes about three layers of ink. So each time I draw, I run the risk of slipping or making a dot in the wrong place.

“Luckily,” she said, “I have a very steady hand!”

“Lyndsay is a lifelong creator and arts advocate in our community,” gallery owner Shari Brownfield said, “and she is able to connect viewers to past and present storytelling, symbolism and ceremony.

“Bison skulls on their own most commonly represent manifestation and abundance, and with the addition of Rowan’s delicate and decisive drawing, the skulls are transformed into messengers of spirit and mythology,” Brownfield said.

“Ceremony” will hang at Shari Brownfield Fine Art through Feb. 1.