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41 °F / 5 °C

Overcast
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Latino Heritage Month Begins with Art Exhibit

By Maggie Wolff Peterson
Special to The Winchester Star

When he received a Fulbright fellowship to teach art in Honduras, William Swetcharnik intended to stay abroad for four months. Instead, he remained for seven years.

In that time, he witnessed the dire poverty under which much of the populace exists. He lived on an elevated version of a rain forest, called a cloud mountain, and in 1998, experienced a force-five hurricane that sent a landslide across a river to create a dam that put much of the city underwater.

Swetcharnik saw how "campesinos" choose to exploit the rare woods in native trees, defoliating the land and upsetting the ecology, because they believe it is the only way they can make enough money to survive.

And he experienced indigenous art, from the murals with which natives decorate their homes to the textiles they create from pounded tree bark. He determined that these crafts could become the economic engine by which people could better their lives, particularly at a time in which eco-tourism is bringing more people to more corners of the world.

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A show of Swetcharnik's work opens today as an observance of Latino Heritage Month at the Shenandoah Arts Council.



William Swetcharnik arranges his painting for a show "William Swetcharnik and the Latin American Art Resource Project" opening today at the Shenandoah Arts Council building at 811 S. Loudoun St., Winchester. The show continues through Oct. 21. (Photo by Scott Mason)

"William Swetcharnik and the Latin American Art Resource Project" is based on the program that Swetcharnik initiated as a Fulbright Scholar.

Swetcharnik was discovered by SAC member

Geraldine Wonjo Keifer, when she did an Internet search for artists appropriate to the Latino theme.

"She found our program on the Web and discovered I wasn't very far away," said Swetcharnik, who lives in Frederick, Md.

Home since 2002, Swetcharnik intends to return to Central America "from time to time," to monitor his program, which was intended to be self-perpetuating.

"It demonstrated how you can make something of value from very limited materials," Swetcharnik said. The areas in which Swetcharnik worked were remote.

"There are no roads," he said. "You travel either by mule, or dugout canoe, or if you have money, airplane."

One side of the rear gallery will be devoted to photos Swetcharnik took of projects in Honduras that he oversaw, while the other displays images he made after Hurricane Mitch took homes,

- I used to but don't have time anymore
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property, and lives.

One photograph shows a schoolhouse on which children painted a large mural, depicting flora and fauna threatened by clearcutting tropical trees. “The kids are making a statement in their own community,” Swetcharnik said.

An urban beautification project undertaken in Tegucigalpa includes a trio of murals on walls bordering a stairway. The painting pictures natives in an Afro-Caribbean fishing village. Most of the murals include social and cultural themes.

“All over the city they did murals,” Swetcharnik said. “Most all of the murals were in poor neighborhoods.”

Another of the photos depicts a collection of large earthen pots made in a village that is the southernmost outpost of Mayan culture, Swetcharnik said. The artisan, a Lenca Indian named Desideria Perez, decorated the pieces with a simple red band at the rim, after firing them in a handbuilt kiln.

“She builds an open-air kiln in her back yard,” Swetcharnik said.

Part of his mission was to teach people such as Perez how to market their goods. Especially marketable are lightweight items, such as textiles, a few of which Swetcharnik has included in his exhibit.

The interior bark of the Tuno tree, when pounded, can be made into a kind of tough cloth that Indians have long used for clothing and blankets. Using it decoratively, in such items as the throw-pillow covers that Swetcharnik displays, creates “a source of income, especially for the women,” he said.

Pigments for the covers, which feature an image of a toucan on a branch in tones of primary red, yellow and green, are found in nature and converted to dye or paint, Swetcharnik said. When Hurricane Mitch came through, the mountain



washouts that resulted actually unearthed minerals in rare colors, he said.

But that was about the only good that came of it.

Force-five winds that blew from the ocean destroyed offshore islands. "One of the islands, it took all the trees down," Swetcharnik said.

The eye "circled around where we were for three days," he said.

On the mountain, "you could see where the mountainside erupted from the water pressure, and created a landslide," Swetcharnik said. "It took out a whole village."

In Tegucigalpa, a river that divides the city rose 50 feet above its normal level, eroding its bank and causing land to topple and create a dyke. The river backed up and overflowed. "A large part of the city was underwater," Swetcharnik said.

From this experience, Swetcharnik undertook paintings of his own that memorialize hurricane victims and pay homage to the forces of survival and recovery.

"On a personal level, it represents the new life that would spring out of ruin and destruction," he said of panels he painted on aggregate stone, juxtaposing faint figures of pregnant women against bright, round pomegranates.

Also in the gallery, in the front room, are paintings by artist Virginia Rosario, whose works build on her Puerto Rican heritage and pre-Columbian Taino iconography.

"Her interest is the Indian culture," said Nikki de Medici, SAC president.

Traditional, folkloric images, including birds, snakes and insects, make up the subject matter of Rosario's works. Multi-media expressions include layers of paint, paper and even such natural elements as leaves.

“They all tell a story,” de Medici said. “All of these symbols and how they relate to the cosmos.”

The opening of the show, from 6 to 9 p.m. today, is timed to coincide with downtown Winchester’s First Friday celebration and will include a live performance by Dominican classical guitarist, Rafael Scarfullery. There is no charge to attend.

Additionally, on Sept. 9, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Swetcharnik and Rosario will be speaking at the SAC, at 811 S. Loudoun St., about the routes they have taken to become the artists they are now. Refreshments will follow. The event is free.

These events are the first entree by SAC into Latino heritage, de Medici said. Buoyed by the success of African-American themed events begun four years ago, the SAC wants to expand into additional cultures and themes, she said.

“To see that blending is very gratifying,” she said.

De Medici, who is multi-lingual, has made sure that publicity for the events has been in both English and Spanish. Posters in Spanish have gone into every Hispanic market, she said. And “when I did (television public-access) Cabletalk, I spoke a little bit in Spanish,” she said.

And on Sept. 10, a concert by the Latin contemporary dance group, Solazo, will be performed at the Old Town Event Center, at 403 South Loudoun St. Tickets are \$12 for SAC members, seniors, and students, and \$15 for non-members. Group tickets may be purchased for \$10, in amounts of five or more, by calling SAC at 667-5166.

“This is dancing-in-the-aisles music,” de Medici said. “It’s fun. We hope we pack people in.”

For information, call 667-5166.

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