



Artist Rebecca Morgan and Andy Grabysiak have a conversation by Morgan's Face Jugs at the Woskob Family Gallery.
Holly Veenis - Photo provided

Artist with central Pa. roots explores conflict in 'Homecoming'

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For artist Rebecca Morgan, the tension between her affection for her central Pennsylvania upbringing and her desire to explore the world has informed much of her work. "Homecoming," now on display at the Woskob Family Gallery, brings together more than six years of artwork that explores the conflict Morgan feels as she navigates between the comfort of her rural roots and the broadened perspective she has gained by branching out into unfamiliar territory.

"My art and life are very much intertwined," said Morgan, who has been teaching drawing at the University of Cincinnati since August. The numerous small portraits in "Homecoming" act as caricatures of small-town, rural life and communicate the rawness of daily existence in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. In her artwork, Morgan says she aims to reflect both a constant critique and a defense of rural living. The most prominent themes in her work are those of the wilderness, "redneck" and "country bumpkin" stereotypes and a continuous self-portraiture/examination.

The "Homecoming" exhibit marks a milestone as it's the first time Morgan's artwork has been shown close to the homeland from which she draws much of her inspiration.

"Her work very much deals with first-person lived experience in Clearfield (County)," said Lindsey Landfried, curatorial assistant for the Woskob Family Gallery. "She is most interested in the type of space where paradox exists."

Morgan, who was born and raised in Clearfield County and received a bachelor's degree from Bloomsburg University, got her first taste of urban culture while attending graduate school at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. While living in New York City was an eye-opening experience, she said, she also missed the simplicity and familiarity of central Pennsylvania. One of the portraits in the "Homecoming" exhibit, "Hunter or Hipster Male," is based on a run-in she had with a guy in Brooklyn who was dressed in a flannel shirt and beanie hat — giving the appearance of a rural workman. Morgan approached the guy, thinking he might hail from her area, but found out he was a New York native who had never set foot in rural Pennsylvania.



Brad Klem poses with Rebecca Morgan's painting "Hunter or Hipster Male," which is part of Morgan's "Homecoming" exhibit at Woskob Family Gallery. **Holly Veenis** - Photo provided

"The heart of (my work) is having a huge sense of pride in where I come from," Morgan said, "And loving both (urban and rural) and wanting both."

Morgan's artwork draws from has a wide range of influences — from Northern Renaissance artists such as Frans Hals and Pieter Bruegel to the "low art" of Mad magazine (artists like Al Jaffee, Harvey Kurtzman and Don Martin). She said that the artists of the Northern Renaissance were pioneers in celebrating aspects of everyday life, rather than simply depicting aristocrats. Morgan said she seeks to emulate those works "using tropes I grew up with."

Morgan said she is also inspired by American folk art and outsider art, especially Pennsylvania Dutch crafts of hex signs and ceramics as well as early American ceramics and historical ephemera. For example, the "Homecoming" exhibit features Appalachian face jugs that stored corn liquor and were designed to scare children away from their contents.

"The influences are both old and new," Landfried said.

Morgan said she has been criticized for making fun of rural individuals in her artwork by depicting them as uncivilized. Many of her portraits depict country folk in a seemingly unflattering way — i.e., women covered in acne with no teeth. However, Morgan said, those images also represent self-empowerment in the sense that those individuals are confident and content with their appearance. She also seeks to express the wilderness as a place of refuge — a rebellion against privilege and high society.

"I really like making images that want something and something else at the same time," she said. "I do what it to be understood (the art) comes out of a place of pride and love."