

Artist Bio (short)

Carolyn S Olson is a narrative artist working and living in northern Minnesota. She uses gouache, oil or pastel and depicts everyday life stories. Figures are intentionally exaggerated and gestures emotive - showing the person's intention and attitude through their body language. She intends her art to inspire us to be better people as we become more aware of ourselves and the world around us.

Artist Bio (long)

Carolyn S Olson is a narrative artist working and living in northern Minnesota. She uses gouache, oil or pastel and depicts everyday life stories. Figures are intentionally exaggerated and gestures emotive - showing the person's intention and attitude through their body language.. Olson recently retired from teaching K-12 art for over thirty years. She continues working in her studio. In 2020-21 she completed a series of narrative portraits of essential workers (Covid-19 pandemic). Inspired by family members working as essential workers Olson retells their stories. Essential workers were asked to work unvaccinated, with low wages, lack of affordable housing and not being able to afford needed health care. The intention of the portraits is to initiate conversations that lead to systemic changes in our society that benefit essential workers.

Current work continues to tell stories of family and community life and personal baking challenges while working on gesture and composition.

Artist Statement (Essential Worker Portrait series)

Beginning with the "Stay at Home order" in March 2020, I have worked on a series of pastel portraits of essential workers. I watched and listened to stories about the effect of Covid-19 on communities and families. Our two adult children work as essential workers. This pastel work provided me with an outlet for my anxiety about our family members working as essential workers. As many continue to work unvaccinated - at huge risk of getting sick and/or dying, it seems society is OK with some being sacrificed.

The art begs the question "how can we ask the essential worker to do this work while not being paid enough, provided no health insurance or affordable housing?" The series continues to initiate conversations between people who have only met online and are asking what it takes to bring about systemic changes in society.

Artist Statement - (Historical and Long)

I am a narrative painter, sculptor, and graphic designer. I observe life around me in hopes I can recreate what I see as important. My compositions are made up of overlapping figures joined and connected through eye contact, body language and architectural grids. I enjoy playing colors against each other and redefining the figures vs. background.

In the early 1980's I spent time working in Jackson, Mississippi-a radically different culture from my home in northern Minnesota. In Jackson, I came of age as an artist and as a person who came to understand the artist's role in reflecting society. During that time, I worked in an African-American owned print shop as a graphic designer. I also worked with a socially active organization focused on integration and equality between race and class. I taught art in the Jackson Public Schools as an art specialist in a gifted elementary art program offered through the Mississippi Museum of Art. My work matured and my perspective as a painter took hold.

At the Mississippi Museum there was an exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's work, including many paintings from *The Builder's Series*. I was drawn to Lawrence's use of strong shapes that told his story simply through gestures and strong exaggerated playful characters. Lawrence painted everyday scenes--people in libraries, little girls playing with dolls, people talking on the street in their neighborhoods. This is a connection that continues as I worked on my own narrative work.

In Jackson, and upon my return to Duluth, I worked with large constructivist figures, reminiscent of the ones I paint. Groupings of the 6 to 12 foot tall figures were displayed in public settings, such as a mother and daughter walking down the street carrying packages after shopping, an anxious couple sitting in the window sill at the bank waiting to apply for a home mortgage loan, or a group of guys and one girl playing pool in a pool hall.

Over the years my art has documented past and present family events, e.g. getting a haircut, shoveling snow off the roof, or visiting my great Aunt's house, as well as activities that define my community, e.g. dancing at the local club, ice skating, or grocery shopping. My paintings, drawings, and sculptures are also the results of my trying to understand another's point of view.

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The art begs the question "how can we ask the essential worker to do this work while not being paid enough, provided no health insurance or affordable housing?" The series continues to initiate conversations between folks grappling with the question of racism and poverty and what it takes to bring about systemic changes in society.

Current work continues to tell stories of family and community (shoveling snow and skating, piano lessons and playing chess) and personal baking challenges (baking Madeleines and croissants) while working on gesture and composition. I am working in all three mediums - gouache, pastel and oil.