

'The Feminine Mystique,' other books on empowerment, inspire Stamford artist's solo show

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Loft Artists Association member Christa Forrest, a co-director of the association, is photographed on Tuesday, March 13, 2018 at the LAA studio and gallery in Stamford, Connecticut. Forrest is opening a solo ... [more](#)

STAMFORD — For years, Christa Forrest went to her job each day knowing she wanted to do something else.

"I worked in finance for 20 years, and then about three years ago, I quit and became a full-time artist and I've been painting ever since," said Forrest, 48, who is now co-director of the Loft Artist Association. "This is sort of like a second life for me."

Known primarily for her landscape paintings and pastels, Forrest divides her time between painting in her studio, teaching an adult art program in Wilton and working at Pinot's Palette in Harbor Point. Though life has gotten "harder and busier" since she made the switch, Forrest said she's happier.

This weekend Forrest will open her first solo show at the LAA gallery on Pacific Street. The show opens Friday and the opening reception will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. on March 23.

The show, she said, is unlike anything she has ever done before.

"I wanted it to be different," she said. "I wanted it to be relevant."

Entitled "The Emerging Goddess," the show will feature about 20 mixed-media portraits of women, many wearing floral or colorful headdresses.

The idea, she said, was one she'd been toying with for more than a year, but it didn't really take hold until recently.

"I started painting these women ... just because I wanted to do something fun and different," she said. "I felt it was a really fitting time ... and it just took off."

The portraits start with a base layer of collages made using the pages from "meaningful and empowering" books, Forrest said. The books are typically feminist in nature, such as Toni Morrison's "Beloved," "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan and poems by Langston Hughes.

Forrest then layered background paint over the collage, occasionally letting some of the pages peek through before painting the portraits.

The women, she said, are not representations of real people — nor are they based on the book pages they are painted over. Instead, Forrest said, they are women she created in her mind.

"None of these were planned," she said. "I sketched a face in and whatever happened, I let it happen."

'In the middle'

A majority of the women portrayed are African American, something Forrest said she didn't plan, but gravitated toward as she painted.

"That's just what resonated with me at that moment," she said. "I grew up in a mixed household in the '70s and there weren't a lot of people like me in Fairfield County in those days."

"Maybe that's why I've gravitated toward women of color for many of these portraits, because ... maybe deep down I haven't really figured me out," she added. "Maybe this is sort of like my subconscious coming out - me trying to find my identity because it was hard for me to find an identity when I was growing up. On one side, I wasn't black enough and on the other side I wasn't white, so I was kind of in the middle, growing up."

The portraits, she said, are also relevant in relation to what's happening in the world.

In today's political climate, Forrest said she's seen familiar political and cultural discussions resurface, many centered around race and women's rights. Women and minorities are again finding platforms from which to make their voices heard.

"These are important conversations that we are having now," she said. "And I hope they don't go away. Things are starting to happen. Women are starting to speak. People are finding their voices. So, this is kind of my contribution to this movement that's happening."

A portion of the proceeds from any sales made will be donated to Ready to Empower, a nonprofit that helps women in Guatemala escape domestic violence and build independence.

Though nervous about how her work will be received, Forrest said she can't wait for the show to open.

"I'm excited," she said. "I feel like I've found a new direction and I'm enjoying what I've created, which doesn't always happen. I just really hope people connect with what I've done."