

THINGS TO DO

Grace Hudson Museum presents virtual exhibition “Look Again”





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On Thursday, June 18, from 6 to 7:15 p.m., the Grace Hudson Museum will offer a virtual presentation titled "Look Again: Celebrating Lives Nearly Overlooked." Artist Julie Lapping Rivera and journalist Amy Padnani will discuss their discoveries and documentations of the lives of overlooked women, and how it inspires their own work.

Padnani is a senior staff editor in the obituaries section of the New York Times and the daughter of immigrants from India. These two facts coincided when Padnani began to wonder why the obituaries didn't include many people like her. She wanted the lives and accomplishments of women and people of diverse ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities to be documented. This rich territory of untold stories resulted in Padnani's creation of the "Overlooked" series for the New York Times obituaries section.

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?/The world would split open," poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote. The "Overlooked" project was instantly generative and appealed to many, spawning three books and numerous talks and gatherings. It also inspired Julie Lapping Rivera, a painter, printmaker, and Smith College instructor residing in rural Massachusetts, to create a series of woodcuts portraying the lives of overlooked women. Matched with a biographical description and many with a tribute poem, the woodcut portraits form the basis for the Exhibit Envoy traveling exhibition Look Again: Portraits of Daring Women, on display at the Grace Hudson Museum and supplemented with additional portraits of notable women by Mendocino County artists, curated by the Museum for its Ukiah presentation.

Rivera describes the feeling of “walking into a beautiful world of women’s accomplishments” when she learned about “Overlooked.” Working in a studio in a converted barn and with numerous prints and other artworks to her credit, she has taught art from grade school to college. “Teaching is the most important thing I have done,” she states. That sense of community extends her wish to honor the lives and accomplishments of several women in the “Overlooked” obituaries, at a time when she felt discouraged by the political scene.



It is fascinating to learn that Rivera chose to use the centuries-old tradition of woodcut carving, which she calls “the original printmaking medium,” to portray these daring and innovative women. “I should have been born in the 1700s,” she muses. “There’s something extremely direct and uncomplicated about the woodcarving process. It’s a technology I can relate to. It’s just carving, inking, printing.” Rivera introduces other techniques into her process as well, such as collage and monotype.

In addition to reaching back in history, Rivera reaches out to poets in her local circle and beyond and asks them to write poems for and about the women she portrays. Each portrait in the Look Again project is accompanied by a poem, with many of the poems on display in the exhibit, adding another rich layer to the viewer's experience. The range of poetic responses is wide. There's Annie Edson Taylor, the first woman to plunge over Niagara Falls in a barrel and live to tell the tale. If she existed in these times, it wouldn't be hard to imagine her thriving as a social media influencer; but having performed the feat in 1901, she achieved more fame than fortune. Poet Jean Blakeman describes it with restrained humor: "When you climb inside the barrel,/your skirt forms a padded circle./The harness. Then the lid. The wide/river takes over."

Other portraits depict lives that are more serious, at times tragic. There's the little-known story of Qiu Jin (1875-1907), known as "China's Joan of Arc," who stares from the canvas in a stark, confrontative gaze, at once pensive and determined. Rivera describes her as a "gender-bender," rebelling against women's roles and abandoning her family to study in Japan, then returning to China to join an uprising against the Qing dynasty. Her outspoken views and unconventional presentation led to her public execution, shown by the two swords held horizontally across her torso, perhaps wishing to wield them to cut through the limitations she and others were presented with.

Many of the poems accompanying the portraits are written in the second person, addressing the artist and their often-troubled lives with respect and affection, as if they had known each other personally. There's the Indian actress Madhubala (1933-1969), a popular actress who died young in a Marilyn Monroe-like career. Poet Libby Maxey addresses her as "a Bombay child/shoulders dancing/...as if you were a spectral song/on gold water." A refugee from Sierra Leone, Michaela Mabinty DePrince overcame warfare, starvation, and discrimination to become an acclaimed ballet dancer in the U.S. In her tribute to DePrince, who died before she reached 30, Lisbeth White evokes DePrince's yearnings: "let me dance again/for miracles/let my body be the body/that summons them."

While many of these women lived short lives, undergoing poverty, neglect, and violence, the joy in the enterprises they undertook and the inspiration they conveyed to others helped inspire the artworks and poetry in Look Again. All these efforts echo across time, space, and gender to create a network of mutuality that will continue to evoke more art. "I try to bring each woman forth in the best way I can," Rivera says of the exhibit. "Together, along with their stories and poems, I hope to create an experience that will be joyful and uplifting."

Look Again: Portraits of Daring Women will be on display through Aug. 16. To connect to the Zoom webinar go to the Museum Events page at www.gracehudsonmuseum.org. For more information, call the Museum at (707) 467-2836.