

Mike Curato: Love Now

Judith van Praag

Nordstrom celebrates Asian Pacific American Heritage this month with "Love Now" an exhibit of artwork by 13 Asian American children's book illustrators.

Most illustrators say that in their business, New York is the place to be, San Francisco perhaps a good second, but Seattle is not likely to make the list of cities to strike out on a career in illustration.

In 2002, with September 11 still fresh in everybody's mind and evidence of the tragedy noticeable all over the city, Michael Curato of New York decided he was ready for a clean start.

Together with three of his friends, the young illustrator, though he loved the Big Apple, headed west to try his luck in Seattle. Starting off as a barista, Curato soon landed a position as intern with Thread, a company that offers art advisory services.

"If it wasn't for Rebecca Richards and Rhonda Howard, I wouldn't still be here," Curato told me over coffee on a warm Saturday afternoon in April. Today he's the only one of four friends who's still in Seattle.

Curato became the assistant to Richards and Howard, whom he refers to as amazing, inspirational women. His internship of 10 months (four more than he had planned) ended on the opening day of Thread's art outlet in Ballard (5000 20th Ave. NW).

Thanks to his internship and by volunteering his skills (designing the web page for the Sacred Heart Shelter, and as sponsorship director of the AIGA Seattle Board), Curato's name and work are starting to become known in town.

The process for designing for Nordstrom's exhibit was a bit different; usually a publisher supplies the illustrator with a text that needs imagery. In Nordstrom's case, the participating artists only received the show's title, "Love Now."

Inspired by a line that entered his mind, "Love is a quiet place in the forest where love grows," Curato created a romantic 22 by 22 inch acrylic painting titled "Quiet Forest." In the middle of a snow covered open space, in a dark forest, a warmly clad child sits on its knees admiring a bell-shaped blossom.

Curato always identified with storytellers – how could he not, for his mother hails from Ireland, land of the bards. However, when it came down to choosing a major it was apparent he had to focus on visual arts. During his first year in college, he was introduced to design and branding. He learned the difference between applied and studio art.

Before receiving his BFA in illustration from Syracuse University, Curato spent a semester in Florence, Italy. This stay resulted in a children's book, "The Adventures of Pina and Zed," a story about children searching for a runaway puppy.

Michael Curato doesn't shy away from making his mark. Because entering the advertising world isn't easy for a newcomer, he's developed an eye for opportunity. Thus he created the packaging for "Gasoline," a CD by "The King of Mice," a local band headed by singer/songwriter Stephen R. Brooks.

Inspired by Edwin Fotheringham, whom he heard speak at the School of Visual Arts, Curato realized he really wants to live and work as an illustrator, so he quit his daytime job with Filter, a creative placement agency.

When I met him, Curato was about to embark on another exciting

adventure, a first time trip to his father's native Bohol in the Philippines. Without a doubt this will lead to a wondrous journey on paper, pictures that speak more than a thousand words.

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