Allons

Big name campus, community figures take viewers to the wetlands' mysterious corners in 'The Swamp Witch'

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An Walk opened its doors at 6 p.m. July 8, showcasing the mysterious works of a coalition of University of Louisiana at Lafayette alumni, former professors and local artists.

Small bands like the violin, fiddle and triangle trio that played in front of Sola Violins on the corner of Vermilion and Jefferson Street were spread out here and there. Artists at the crafts and jewelry tables at Wuest Art Market and in numerous other galleries displayed their creations, hoping to sell them to the crowds if they could. People young and old took their time observing all the artwork in the galleries around town and mingled with one another in groups.

The same atmosphere was found at "The Swamp Witch" art exhibition at Basin Arts Galleries on Clinton Street from 6-9 p.m. The piece centers around the Louisiana folklore of the legend of the Swamp Witch of Maurepas, Kate Mulvaney and her story of loss and redemption.

"The idea of an art exhibition about the Swamp Witch was first conceived of by Dr. Maurice DuQueensay of UL's English department," said Jonathan Ahbee, the director of this exhibition. "Years ago, Maurice had asked artist George Rodrigue to create a painting about the Louisiana folk tale, but Rodrigue was unable to produce a painting due to lack of time."

The inspiration for this exhibition came from DuQueensay's interest in the story itself; he remembered it as it was told to him as a child and young adult growing up in New Orleans. According to DuQueensay, the story has stayed with him for years.

"I sought to enlist the talents of artists, poets and writers to 'incarnate' in their art the legend of the Witch of Maurepas," DuQueensay said. "Those artists were sought out because I knew their work to reflect a command of art that went beyond their achieved craftsmanship. They were invited for their imaginative and spiritual vision which included yet transcended technique."

A few years ago, UL Lafayette photo and art professor Lynda Frese was working with DuQueensay and attempted to organize this show. She urged him to bring the project to fruition.

However, the project was put on hold for various reasons. In January, DuQueensay was ready to pursue completion of the show but Frese's busy schedule did not permit her time to direct it.

"Lynda contacted me regarding taking over as director and I happily accepted," said Ahbee. "I asked my friend and fellow graduate Stevi Latiolais to assist. This was a great opportunity for Stevi and I, having just graduated from UL Lafayette back in December, to participate in an exhibition and gain director and curating experience. It's also encouraging when you are shown faith in your ability, reliability and potential."

The exhibition showcased 21 works by 19 different artists, with a diverse group of artistic styles including paintings, photographs, prints, sculptures and much more.

One such artwork was an acrylic painting titled "The Witch of Maurepas" by Robert Dafford, a famous artist and resident of the Lafayette area who has painted over 400 murals in about 25 cities and five countries.

"I portrayed Kate as a red-haired Irish woman in a cottage," Dafford said. "I wanted to portray her dissolving into the nature around her, transcending as a spirit of nature."

The exhibition hosted over 50 patrons within the first hour of its opening.

"I thought the exhibition was quite interesting," said visitor Melissa Teter. "It's amazing that the artworks show so many different perceptions on one subject."

The visitors admired all the artworks and pinpointed certain aspects they liked about each of them as they stood eating and drinking the exhibition's provided refreshments in groups.

While others wished to commemorate the artworks by taking photos of them. Brandon Faulk, another visitor, wanted to record the artworks by sketching them instead. Faulk claims that taking photos of any kind of artwork is rude.

"I thought the exhibition was very nice," Faulk said. "But I just wish that Art Walk was longer so we can take the time to admire exhibitions like this one."

Ahbee said aside from fulfilling the dream of DuQueensay, this exhibition should bring awareness to lesser known literature of Louisiana. It should also bring together artists from different backgrounds and styles, showing them how visual artists interpret the story of Mulvaney.

"Our exhibition is intended for any individual," said Ahbee, "as long as they have an appreciation for visual arts, folklore and an imagination."