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Painting through the pain and worry

By Daniel Jackovino
Staff Writer

Glen Ridge artist and cancer survivor Theresa DeSalvio will be exhibiting a series of works in an upcoming exhibition called, “Art and Healing — expressions of trauma and gratitude.” The show is scheduled for March 16 to May 19, at the Monmouth Museum, located on the campus of Brookdale Community College, Lincroft.

DeSalvio was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2013 after an inoperable tumor was located in her chest. She underwent a six-month period of chemotherapy, had three weeks off and then began radiation treatment over a large area of her torso.

“I knew I would have bad side effects,” she said earlier this week in her Appleton Road home. “I couldn’t swallow or speak. Water felt like razor blades.”

Her chemotherapy occurred every two weeks. After the first week, she felt nauseous. But feeling better after the second week, she started to work in her third-floor studio again. Once she did, she began to chronicle her experience as it progressed toward recovery. The result was a series of 17 paintings which she called “In Treatment (Working Toward the Cure).” Twelve of these paintings will be in the upcoming Monmouth Museum exhibit.

“The paintings were a kind of step-by-step of the cancer unfolding,” she said. “I was told I had a mass and came home and painted a mass.”

This was DeSalvio’s first painting in the series and is simply titled “The Mass.” It is followed by “The Wait” and “Sleepless Nights.” The paintings are largely self-portraits. In only one of the 12 does another figure appear. It is her son, she said. He is cutting her hair. DeSalvio said a nurse who saw “Sleepless Night” said she recognized it as the night before a patient receives their first chemo treatment. DeSalvio appreciated the comment.

“The paintings were done quickly,” she said. “I only had a few days a month that I felt good. The paintings are pretty raw. They were a kind of pouring out. They weren’t labored. A lot had to do within my time frame. As the chemo treatment progresses, you feel a lot worse.”

The series progresses with “The Pet Scan,” “The Treatment,” “The Hat” and “The Haircut,” where a figure is seen before a mirror cutting her hair. In “The Buzz,” her son gives her head a buzz cut. DeSalvio



Photo by Daniel Jackovino

Glen Ridge artist Theresa DeSalvio with her painting, “Double Vision.”

said there was a solemnness to this painting.

“There is a biblical solemnness in having your head shaven,” she said. “To submit yourself to it is very solemn. That’s what I wanted to capture.”

Although her experience undergoing treatment was a very personal matter, DeSalvio was always aware of the universality of the experience of mortality.

“The experience is not unique,” she said. “What is unique is making an image of it. To see this visually, especially for people who have experienced this, it shows you that you are not alone. People can relate to the intensity of the paintings. That’s part of the importance of it.”

The series continues with “Radiation,” “Double Vision,” “The Nap Horizontal” and “Why Me?” which concludes the 12-painting series.

In “Radiation,” the figure is upside-down. What seem to be radiating waveforms enter the picture plane like a rainbow. DeSalvio said the figure is painted upside-down to convey a complete sense of submission.

“The Nap Horizontal” has a figure at sleep, the top of its head seemingly locked against the right edge of the painting. The only sense of movement comes from an arm resting above a yellow blanket. But its shoulder and elbow are painted as sharp

edges and its hand is claw-like against the lower edge of the painting. To the viewer, it may appear the dreamer is having a difficult sleep with no escape until they awake. But DeSalvio said this painting was not meant as a self-portrait, but just someone escaping through sleep.

While her subject matter is somber, DeSalvio loves color and these paintings are colorful. She began these compositions by drawing with a willow stick.

The final painting in the upcoming exhibit, “Why Me?” was also the 17th painting in her “In Treatment” series. Again, the jagged edges of “The Nap Horizontal” are seen. But in that previous painting, the sharp angles are made by the figure. In “Why Me?” they are a lightning-like backdrop in bold colors. The figure looks at them or perhaps more correctly, to them. DeSalvio said when something bad happens outside your control, people look to a higher power for answers.

“You’re faced with death, your own mortality,” DeSalvio said. “Even having a curable cancer. You look inward when certain things happen.”

The opening reception for “Art and Healing” is Saturday, March 16, from 5 to 7 p.m. There will be an artists panel discussion on Sunday, April 14, from 2 to 3:30 p.m.