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Capturing rural Wisconsin on canvas

Town of Eagle woman seeks to capture Americana before it disappears

By MATTHEW WEBBER
Freeman Staff

NEW BERLIN — Driving through Wisconsin, inspiration strikes her. She stops to take a photo of a barn, shop or tree. A few months later, her oil painting of the scene hangs in the New Berlin Public Library, eliciting a hush from patrons and librarians alike.

The painting looks real, they say. It looks like a place they've seen.

But the artist remains modest. Painting is just something Audrey Casey has to do.

When asked why she continues to paint almost 30 years after she began, Casey, of the town of Eagle, said she didn't know.

"I just like to do it," said the award-winning artist, former painting instructor and grandmother. "It's something you have to do. It goes through your mind if you're not doing it. At night, you think what you're going to do tomorrow."

Casey, 74, paints whenever and whatever inspires her, usually landscapes of rural Wisconsin or Ireland.

With her current exhibit of Wisconsin paintings, Casey's

goal was to capture rural Americana before it disappears.

Her work "reflects an understanding of the past, combined with the present, to convey the spirit of rural life," she said, a statement that seems to resonate with the people who purchase her "very peaceful" and "serene" work.

"They recognize a lot of the places," she said. "Everything I paint is a definite something. They can drive out and look at it."

But as cities continue to sprawl outward, Casey's paintings could provide some people with a memory of the past.

"I hope they remember what things look like, how it used to be, because so many of the buildings I see are disappearing," she said. "They have metal sheds now. Metal barns."

Casey admits "it's so nice to really love what you're doing and to make a living at it," but painting also provides an opportunity for bonding with her family.

When her grandchildren visit her home and studio, they point to her work and say, "Wow. You did that? How do you do that? Show me," said Casey, happy to be teaching art again.

Her creative process seldom varies. From a photograph taken from the side of the road, she then sketches the scene before adding "layers and layers" of oil paint for "months and months."

She always wears jeans and

requires silence when painting.

"I have to have quiet," Casey said. "I shut the door so I don't hear anything."

One reason the process takes so long is she waits for each layer to dry before adding the next.

"If I do wet on wet, I can't get that much detail, like all those small branches on trees," she said.

Those tiny details are a large part of what makes her paintings

so popular, as the New Berlin library features her as its "artist of the month" several times throughout the year, librarian Katie Schulz said.

"Audrey is one of our favorite artists," Schulz said. "Everybody likes her stuff and they purchase it. She's a real popular artist in this area."

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Waukesha Freeman



Matthew Webber/Freeman staff

Audrey Casey of the town of Eagle stands surrounded by some of her oil paintings in the New Berlin Public Library. The library will feature her scenes of rural Wisconsin until the end of the year.

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New Berlin Public Library librarian

At a glance

- **WHAT:** rural Wisconsin painting exhibit
- **WHO:** Audrey Casey of the town of Eagle
- **WHERE:** New Berlin Public Library, 15105 Library Lane
- **WHEN:** until the end of the year