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'Jewish Cowboy' Paints Western Life

Jason Butt
Staff Writer

In the center of a second-floor gallery in the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville sits a recreated studio, complete with a fallen pencil lying on the floor.

The detail included in Kenneth M. Freeman's posthumous exhibit coincides with the detail Freeman sought with his art.

His paintings surround the studio, creating an image of Freeman's being still at work.

"We really tried to give the impression that the artist just got up to go get a cup of coffee," said Seth Hopkins, executive director of the Booth Museum.

Freeman's exhibit is titled "An Artist at Work" and is on display at the Booth Museum until May 2. Hopkins explained the Booth, which is the first museum to show this body of work, wanted to capture the setting Freeman worked in as well as to present this collection.

"Because there was so much artwork left in his studio and the studio was left intact, it provided the opportunity to do this kind of exhibition and physically recreate his studio, and to show such a wide range of one artist's work," Hopkins said.

The recreated studio contains items Freeman, a self-proclaimed Jewish cowboy from Chicago, used in his paintings. One item is a ceramic cat bought from a Native American girl after she posed with it for one of his paintings. Freeman's Western-style jean jacket, that he consistently wore, hangs from his desk chair.

Freeman is known for his use of lighting and color, influenced by Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens and John Singer Sargent. His detailed strokes grab the viewer's attention. He occasionally used one-haired paintbrushes to capture detail.

Freeman, obsessed with cowboys and Western culture as a child, decided he wanted to venture into painting professionally at the age of 8 – a vision he never gave up. Freeman's curator, Bonnie Adams, said after taking a painting lesson, he came home and declared his family's living room as his studio, the coffee table his workspace.

"He told me this story, he said, 'I cleared off the table and this is my studio,'" Adams said. "Right then and there, he painted there until he left home."

Freeman, who passed away in June of 2008 with appendix cancer, painted professional bull riders, ranchers, mountain men and Native Americans. Freeman also lived the lifestyle he painted, often bartering with Natives, sometimes in exchange for his art.

Adams said Freeman's realism was uncharacteristic compared to other Jewish artists, who traditionally paint abstract and symbolic paintings.

"That's not what Jewish artists are usually known for," Adams said. "Ken would always say, 'Well, I'm a Jewish cowboy – from Chicago.'"

Freeman has painted portraits for actor John Wayne and country musicians Waylon Jennings and Ray



In "Tough Draw," Kenneth M. Freeman painted a rodeo bull rider, who was photographed moments after finding out he drew a bull notorious for his mean attitude.

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Herndon. Wayne's son Ethan said Freeman's portrait was the best he's ever seen of his father.

After Freeman moved to Arizona from Chicago in 1978, Adams said his Western painting "became more developed."

"He really embraced the lifestyle," Adams said. "He became a cowboy."

Each Freeman portrait depicts a meaning, detailing his subject's traditions and customs he refused to omit.

"If you look at how Ken started as a child, in a poor Jewish community that's filled with heritage and culture," Adams said. "That's why he appreciated the culture and heritage of the mountain man, the cowboy, the Native American."

Freeman would wake up each day and paint from sunrise to sunset, said Adams, in natural light at the north window in his house, etching each fine feature in a three-step process involving pencil sketching, a layer of burnt umber under-painting and oil colors on top.

Each Freeman painting depicts a level of truth. Freeman painted a rodeo cowboy looking somber after drawing a vicious bull to ride (Tough Draw). He also asked a Native American mother to pose with her two daughters as they wove baskets (Power of the Basket).

"He painted their souls," Adams said. "He painted their passion."

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Adler Publishing, Inc. | Atlanta Jewish Times
8300 Dunwoody Pl.
Hightower Centre 1, Ste. 150
Atlanta, GA 30345
404.564.4550

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