

WESTON TOWN-CRIER

Weston artist pays homage to reclusive photographer

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Paintings by Weston artist Xima Lee Hulings inspired by vintage portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer (1884-1959) will be on display at the Weston Library during the month of June.

A recluse and an eccentric, Disfarmer was the sole portrait photographer in the Heber Springs, Ark., area between 1928 and 1959. Farmers, soldiers and their sweethearts, families, couples and children came from miles around to pose in front of a stark backdrop.

Disfarmer would disappear behind his camera, sometimes for hours at a time, and then get his shot. His fee was 50 cents. He never raised it. His subjects are often in their Sunday best, though they sometimes look as if they have just left the fields.



"Tough Guys" by Weston artist Xima Lee Hulings
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Hulings came across Disfarmer by chance when she was taking a class at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. His "somewhat awkward, but honest" images captivated her, and soon she was immersed in his personal story.

Disfarmer, née Mike Meyer, was born in Indiana. His father, who had been a Union soldier during the Civil War, uprooted his family and moved to Arkansas to become a rice farmer. He died when young Mike was only 14.

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Mike and his mother moved to the Heber Springs area in 1914 and, four years after his mother's death in 1935, he petitioned to have his legal name changed to Disfarmer. According to Hulings, "He believed that he was not the Meyers' son, but had, in fact, been caught up in a tornado and deposited on their doorstep. He changed his name to Disfarmer (i.e., not a farmer) to distance himself from this family that he really didn't consider his own."

He was an odd duck, Hulings said. "A very displaced individual. Definitely not a Norman Rockwell. More like Boo Radley. It is said that in the last three years of his life he subsisted only on beer and chocolate ice cream."

But still, she said, Disfarmer had a willingness to embrace the people as they really were. "This is reality in all its splendor."

When Disfarmer's works were "discovered" in 1974, 15 years after his death, they stood forth as a straightforward, unsentimental depiction of rural Americans living in a rough place at a rough time. Many find a sense of tenderness and longing that haunts the images.

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In recognition of his status as a latter-day American icon, Disfarmer's grave has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hulings first creates a painting using the original photographs as her inspiration. She often creates a mandala pattern behind them, then a geometric design as a border on the bottom, and applies gold leaf.

Hulings says she works on several pieces at once, leaving them for a time and then going back when she feels she knows the subject better.

"This is the longest I have ever focused on one theme. I've been working on this since 2006. The people speak to me very much and have done so from the beginning. So I don't try to research who they are.

"Over the years I've worked on this project, I've learned that the most minimal starting point has a wealth of potential if you wait for it. I have learned patience and that simple things reveal complicated, complex narratives."

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For the upcoming exhibit, Hulings plans to hang about 38 paintings from what she calls "The Disfarmer Series." They range in size from 9 by 12 inches to 2 by 6 feet.

Prices range from \$600 to \$5,000.

An artist reception and talk will be held on Wednesday, June 9 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. For more information call 781-893-3312.



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