

Wearable art

SANTA FE, N.M. — A new exhibition premiering tonight aims to break down the idea that T-shirt printing isn't art.



Local artist David Sloan's T-shirt showing endangered species with their names written in Navajo is one of the shirts that will be on display through Axle Contemporary's Mobile Gallery starting this weekend.

Axle Contemporary's Total Shirt Show, with an opening reception starting at 5 p.m. at the mobile gallery's van parked at the Rail-yard Pavilion, includes the work of 12 New Mexico artists with silk screen printing and T-shirt design in their repertoires.

"Fundamentally, these are works of art by any definition," said Axle Contemporary co-founder Jerry Wellman. "Because they're wearable, it takes them into somewhat of a different realm."

He said Axle will exhibit one T-shirt from each designer, all made either by hand or using a silk screen printer rather than digital processes or iron-ons. The display's idea is to show that wearable pieces belong in the art and design world.

T-shirts have been used to depict artistic or political expression at least since the 1960s. Wellman

said the historical longevity of the form played a role in his wanting to do the exhibit, along with the fact that T-shirts are something almost everyone identifies with.

For Santa Fe artist Joel Nakamura, someone buying his artwork printed on clothing means more than someone buying it for their wall, because of the personal connection that comes with wearing it around. His T-shirt with a petroglyph-inspired male stick figure will be shown at Axle. He sells most of his work at local shops like Tees and Skis, and Harry's Roadhouse.

"It's like a tattoo, but less risky," said Nakamura on someone choosing to wear an artist-made T-shirt. He described his prints as "modern folk art with a bizarre urban edge."

According to Wellman, it's Axle Contemporary's goal to show designs with various themes — some simply for their design value and others that make political statements.

David Sloan, an indigenous painter and printer, will display a street art design that includes prints of several endangered species labeled with their names written in Diné, the native Navajo language.

“As you lose our languages, you lose the connection (to animals). The animal is our brother or sister It’s kind of like an environmental awareness of our daily actions and what we do to assess things. It’s trying to also resist assimilation (of) language, even.”

He teaches silk screen printing at Warehouse 21 and began making his environment-based wearable art several years ago. He likes the fact that the inexpensive and accessible printing process makes it easier to deliver a message to mass amounts of people.

But not all of the artists are using a print-making process. Local artist Tim Jag’s piece in the show will be hand-painted to create a one-of-a-kind design. He sees wearable art as a way to “democratize” images. “It’s not precious, its not expensive ... it takes it out of the realm of fine art,” said Jag.

By Megan Bennett / Journal North Reporter
Friday, October 6th, 2017