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July, Fri 19, 2024

## Librado Romero's life-inspired art exhibited at Gallery 505 in Riverdale



Librado “Lee” Romero was an accidental photographer but a natural born artist. Now a Riverdale resident, his life story traverses the globe, with every new landscape inspiring portions of his art.

Romero’s work was recently welcomed into the space at Gallery 505, hosted by the Kingsbridge-Riverdale-Van Cortlandt Development Corp. gallery, 505 W. 236th St.

To understand his paintings, Romero explains his childhood and his life as a photojournalist, with each chapter providing him with new inspiration.

He grew up in Calexico, a small town in southern California just shy of the Mexican border, where his father was a railroad worker. He said he has fond memories of growing up in the town. At the age of four, Romero’s father would take him to work, where he would occupy himself inside of the train waiting room, occasionally leaving the room to wander across the street and watch the caricature artists at work.

When he was around 12 years old, the navy gave Romero an important job, spotting airplanes crossing the border from a nearby tower. With a headset and a pair of binoculars, he would spend the day spotting planes with his friends.

Life after Calexico sent Romero on to art school. Shortly after graduation, he enlisted in the army. When he arrived in Germany, Romero said the army was looking for a photographer.

With little knowledge of the discipline, he took on the role that would carve the path for his later career.

Fresh out of the army, he took his first photojournalism job with a Dutch newspaper while applying for any photography positions he could back in the United States. Eventually, he was hired at The Providence Journal in Rhode Island and he returned to America. From there, he took a job at The New York Times before pursuing magazine photography and freelancing for outlets like Newsweek, Time and The New York Times Sunday Magazine.

His work took him to Mexico, where he trained newer photographers at the paper El Sol de Mexico. Eventually, Romero ended up right back at The New York Times until he retired from photojournalism in 2013.



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Romero said his favorite job of all time was working as a caption writer for The New York Times, which he only did for about six months.

“It was like getting paid to solve puzzles,” he said.

Despite his successful photojournalism career, Romero considers himself to be an artist.

“It’s my passion. I do it everyday,” he said.

His studio, which currently resides in the YoHo artist studios in Yonkers, has what he estimates to be at least 1,000 paintings inside and, because his workflow never ceases, he continues to paint, sell and give away his artwork. He said he’s lost track of how many paintings he’s completed.

When he doesn’t have his art studio handy, Romero said he often finds himself doodling in what he refers to as sketchbooks but is actually any paper he can get his hands on. His Yonkers studio has book shelves filled with novels and books that depict drawings and sketches done right over the words.

Everything is art to Romero.

Much of Romero’s artwork is inspired by his life mixed with fantasy. Airplanes can be seen depicted throughout much of his work, reminiscent of the time he spent as a boy in the watchtower. Many of his paintings include a mountain in the background, Mount Signal, the mountain he grew up gazing at from a distance in Calxico.

Romero’s time as a photojournalist in Somalia involved war and despair, which inspired a darker set of paintings, or others that feature tall figures in the vibrant traditional clothing of Somalian women.

His time spent in Yonkers has also inspired paintings that depict homes stacked on top of one another with a church settled on top, just the way they appear on the Yonkers hillside off the Saw Mill Parkway.

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A number of his pieces feature what look to be random words or letters, but Romero said none of it is random and instead draws from a sobriety test in a small town bar he once frequented in Arizona. He said the poster used to hang behind the bar and depicted an eye test but instead of standalone letters words were written on the page. The test was given by the bartenders when customers seemed to be too drunk; they were forced to read the test to determine sobriety.

The words were never supposed to form a coherent sentence. If the customer found one, they were cut off.

“When you have a theme, do variations on that theme, do it as many times as you can in so many styles,” Romero said.

Several of the pieces on display in Gallery 505 depict rocks along the Rhode Island shore that Romero painted in different styles and formats.

Nina Velazquez, art director for the KRVC, handpicked both Romero and his artwork for the gallery’s latest July 11 opening.

“In a way, it was very easy to curate the show. There are paintings that are quite different but they all work together,” Velazquez said.

Romero paints every day and spends time with his wife, Mary Hardiman, his FM radio and a set of congas he plays when he reaches an artistic block.

Romero’s artwork will be on display inside Gallery 505 through Sept. 6 on Fridays from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. All other viewings must be scheduled by appointment in advance.