

# Local artist paints portraits with words

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Waiting in the ferry line at the north end of Vashon is part and parcel of island life. It can also be maddening. Yet on the east side of the Port of Vashon building, hidden from the road by towering shrubs, is a spectacle waiting to alleviate the tedium of bogged-down travel: A mural, painted by island artist and author Jesse Johnson, faces out toward the water. Walk up close and the black squiggles on a sea-blue background become sentences fragmented by the shape they form. Step back, and instantly the characters coalesce into a two-story-tall portrait of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

Is it art? Is it writing? Ask Johnson and he'll say it's a combination of writing, literary scholarship and the visual arts — all of his interests coming together at the same time. But it's not something he ever expected to do. The idea — to create portraits out of text — came to him in 2015, after he'd finished writing his young adult novel, "Yearbook." Painting the mural came later, about a year and a half after Johnson had completed his first text portrait series printed on paper.

Johnson, who grew up on Vashon, spent a year abroad in Chile and completed his PhD in English at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He wrote his dissertation on poetry and portraiture, so there was fertile ground for his vision to grow. How to manifest it then became the challenge. He decided to create 12 series of 12 poets each and turned for help to his friend, graphic designer and owner of Vashon's Hinge Gallery Brent Houston, who steered him toward Adobe Illustrator.

Each portrait started with Johnson dropping a photograph of a poet into the computer program and converting it to black and white. Next, Johnson wrote the text, which is no small feat — poet Wallace Stevens' portrait required 10,000 words, the length of a novella and Emily Dickinson's portrait absorbed 4,000 words, about the size of a short story. Johnson's first series of 12 portraits constitute a novel, with 80,000 words. After filling the image with words, Johnson started to paint.

"I call it 'painting' with tongue in cheek," he said. "That's where the rubber hits the road because that's when the image starts to influence the writing. The space is there, and I have to fill it exactly."

Inside the Port of Vashon building that features the Neruda portrait on its exterior, Johnson's portraits hang on the walls of an exhibition space he shares with his mother, Hita von Mende, a well-known Northwest island painter. Johnson points to a long narrow section in his original, smaller Neruda portrait. The shape looks like the country of Chile. Into that formation, Johnson poured Neruda's writing about the Chilean foothills, demonstrating "how shape influences language." In poet Djuna Barnes' portrait, the text that forms her mouth combines Johnson's writing with her words set in italics: "*Someone has told me that I have a peculiar habit of noticing mouths,*" you (referring to Barnes) wrote, in an essay on Alfred Stieglitz from 1917 (his was the mouth in question). *I have.*"

Not all of the writing quotes the subjects he is working with, though, or is even scholarly. Some is a description of what Johnson sees or the music he hears as he writes.

"Part of the fun," he said, "is that historically, a portrait is a kind of



Juli Goetz Morser/Staff Photo

Island artist Jesse Johnson with his painting of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

monument, a memorialization, so I poke fun at that by putting trivial, temporary-seeming things in the portrait. It places them in space and reality and history."

In Neruda's case, that place is a wall on Vashon that measures nearly 13 feet by 19 feet. Johnson chose Neruda for the mural because he wrote his college thesis on the poet and translated his poetry. Neruda is also associated with the sea. He wrote facing it, enamored with the blue water. Johnson, likewise, wrote upstairs in the Port of Vashon building, facing the water of Puget Sound.

"There's a Neruda thing going on with this building," Johnson said with a laugh, "and he has a Vashon vibe about him — being into the natural world, finding beauty in everyday objects. He was a great poet of romantic love. Vashon has a certain romance for those of us who live here."

Talking with Johnson, he seems to savor discovering subtle links, the unexpected associations that emerge unbidden, like the rather prescient passage he wrote into Neruda's portrait months before he chose to paint the mural: "And now, Don Pablo, you are an icon, a legend, of a kind, a face on the wall. Someone to whom we can turn in the dark of the night."

As for the final word on his art, Johnson said it's about simplifying the world.

"I like the negative space as much as anything," he said. "This is like 21st century art, where the computer is actually making the image, where the computer is the collaborator. That interests me. Portraits are a way to show off the artist's technical craftsmanship, and I jump over all that. We know how to make images, we've been doing it a long time, so let the computer do that. I'll do what I do well, which is to write and conceptualize."