

IN SEARCH OF: ARTIST EUGENE LANDRY

By Judith Altruda

It started as a simple question "Whatever happened to that old cabin and dome on the bay, where the tribal gas station is now?"

The cabin, its weather-worn white paint abraded to silver, was nestled on the edge of a salt marsh overlooking Shoalwater Bay. Next to it sat a funky 70's style geodesic dome, its front wall made entirely of glass. These buildings, the former home and studio of artist Eugene Landry, languished empty after his death in 1988. I could not recall exactly when they had been torn down, only that I was sad to see them go.

When I first came to Tokeland in the early 1980s, I met Eugene at his family's Indian Museum on the Shoalwater Bay reservation. He was a recognized painter and I was just finding my way with art. Landry was able to capture the essence of his subject matter in a simple, direct way. I already knew, from trial and error, that the simplest art is the most difficult to achieve. It's easy to overwork, to over render an image. Landry's charcoal drawings were gestural and alive. His paintings were more poetry than prose. He was an artist's artist. And everything he created was done from the confines of a wheelchair.

The day after I was asked about the cabin and dome, I attended an event at the Shoalwater Bay Tribal Center, where a painting of glass fishing floats and other beachcombed treasures caught my eye. I didn't need to see the artist's signature to know it was by Eugene Landry. Although I loved his art, I knew little about the man. A conversation ensued with a tribal elder who had grown up with Eugene. This led to a series of conversations. It didn't take long to realize Landry's life was as remarkable as his art. The idea for a book was born.

Portrait of an Artist

Born in May 1937, Eugene came to live with his adoptive parents, Fred and Myrtle Landry, when he was a baby. He attended the two-room school house in Tokeland and then Ocosta Jr. Sr. High school.



Three days before the school year ended, in 1954, Ocosta School burned to the ground. The following year, Eugene, now a junior, attended Weatherwax High School in Aberdeen with the rest of his Ocosta class. A photo in the Aberdeen yearbook shows Gene in advanced art class, working alongside another schoolmate destined for artistic acclaim, Irp Hermann.

"Gene was cool when everyone else was warm" recounts tribal elder Kenneth Baker. Landry emulated his hero James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause, wearing a red jacket, white T shirt and jeans. He was a gifted runner, but was not allowed to run on the track team because he refused to cut his hair. He drove a red '32 Ford coupe that he restored himself.

The following September, Gene began his senior year at the brand new Ocosta School. Probably, like everyone else in the class of '56, he shared the sense of excitement in being first class that would graduate from the modern new facility. He had no way of knowing when he started school that year his life was about to change.

No one remembers ever discussing the details of his illness. Perhaps his sense of humor and lack of self-pity kept the questions unasked. During his senior year of high school, Gene contracted spinal meningitis. He

was treated at Cushman Indian Hospital in Tacoma. He came home in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down.

True Grit

Gene and his parents moved to Seattle. Determined to succeed in spite of his disability, he attended Art College. His subject matter ranged from city to beach, and portraiture.

"He painted from the time he got into his chair in the morning until night," remembers tribal elder, Colleen Dietl. In 1965, Eugene married an artist, Sharon. He had an art gallery in Santa Barbara. In the 1970s, Gene returned to



Shoalwater Bay, moving into the house by the bay. Gradually his condition deteriorated. He lost the use of his right arm, causing him to paint with the left. Toward the end of his life when he lost the use of both arms, Gene painted by holding a brush in his mouth.

Wanted: Art!

Eugene Landry was a prolific artist. Much of his work resides in private collections. My goal is: find as much as possible, with the hopes of photographing it for a book about his life. My mission is to preserve the artistic legacy of Eugene Landry for future generations. Can you help?

If you are the owner of a Eugene Landry drawing, painting or print, (or know someone who is), please contact Judith Altruda at altruda2898@comcast.net. (360) 267-2326

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