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ENTERTAINMENT

A South Dakota artist spent much of the pandemic creating. Where you can see his work?

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While he might be reluctant to admit it, Dwayne Wilcox enjoyed spending time alone during COVID-19 quarantine.

Last year, the artist spent a lot of time in his studio alone where he made a collection of paintings that are currently on display at the Johnson Fine Arts Center at Northern State University.

“I hate saying that during the pandemic,” Wilcox said with a laugh.

While the rest of the nation spend time baking banana bread, watching “Tiger King” and perhaps even working from home, he found an escape through the time he spent making art.

Wilcox, 64, has been painting for so many years, his family hardly bats an eye whenever he finishes one of his paintings or drawings. He’s been making art for as long as he can remember and recalls doodling as a child when he grew up on a ranch in the small town of Wanblee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwestern South Dakota.

He is Oglala Lakota, and much of his art focuses on taking themes of the past and incorporating them with themes of contemporary Native American life and culture.

Wilcox said that his work has less realism and is more abstract. He has mostly focused on ledger art throughout his career, which refers to a type of drawing that originated amongst Native American communities in the Great Plains in the 1860s. Wilcox also uses sarcasm and humor in his artwork, traits he said he got from his father.

He said he never received any formal art training, but remembers admiring an artist

named Tom Sitting Up, who was in the grade ahead of him at school. While Wilcox was always good at drawing people, he couldn't get the hang of drawing animals, which Sitting Up taught him to do. In 1974, he and Sitting Up did a mural at an arrow factory, which was Wilcox's first paid gig.

Although he always enjoyed art, he thought it would be difficult to make a living doing it, and so he learned about electronics, then joined the military. He was in the Air Force 1980 to 1984, and served in Montana, Florida, and Panama. He continued drawing and painting while he served.

It was during his time in the military that Wilcox met his wife. They sat next to each other on a plane going to their military base from Denver to Great Falls, Mont. Wilcox served for four years, but his wife served as a military nurse for 27 years, causing them to move often.

When they were living in Myrtle Beach, S.C., Wilcox's wife was involved in the Gulf War and left the country for about a year. Wilcox was living at a military base alone and decided he didn't want to take his children to day care. At the time, the youngest kid was 3. So, he began drawing. He mostly did portraits, although he said he didn't make much money from them and he wasn't passionate about them.

Through the next 15 years, he took several part-time, seasonal jobs until he was able to fully make a living from his art. That's something he said is much easier for artists now with the rise of social media. Still, Wilcox traveled to many arts in the park-style shows. He said he was able to make it by building a small following wherever he went.

"By the time technology caught up, I was kind of already there, wherever there is," he said.

In 2003, Wilcox moved to Rapid City with his wife as his mother's health was beginning to fail. Wilcox said he's happy that his mom got to see her son's career as an artist take off.

"She was so proud of me," he said.

He has an art studio in Rapid and has travelled extensively, speaking about his art everywhere from Harvard and Dartmouth to the University of San Diego, a trip he prefers to make during the South Dakota winters.

Recently, Wilcox released a book with Karen Miller Nearburg called "Visual/Language: The Ledger Drawings of Dwayne Wilcox." He doesn't like writing, but did it anyway for the

book, which features a collection essays and about 60 pieces of his artwork.

A collection of Wilcox's paintings is on display in the Johnson Fine Arts Center at Northern State University through Nov. 30.