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An artist to the end: Gregory Stone, known for Northampton street portraits, dies of cancer

A girl, an injured dove and a dream of peace. That's the hopeful statement artist Gregory Stone conjured in one of his final works — a sculpture soon to be installed on the lawn of the courthouse in Northampton.

Stone, a painter and sculptor, died at 2:10 p.m. Thursday at his home in Hatfield after a fight against metastatic colon cancer. He was 69.

As recently as a week ago, Stone had been out painting Valley scenes, including the Chesterfield Gorge.

“He lived his vision. He lived the life,” said Rich Michelson, whose Main Street gallery once represented the artist's work.

Stone is being remembered locally not only for his artistry but for his fierce independence and deep regard for the dignity of ordinary people. His most recent exhibit came down Thursday, though his paintings and sculptures can be seen across the Valley, in bars and galleries alike.

Plans for services are not yet complete, but one is expected to be held within the next week in the Athol area, where Stone grew up.

Nationally known

Though perhaps best known for his street portraits in western Massachusetts, Stone's work over a more than 40-year career reached national audiences and collections. His commissioned bronze sculpture of Anne Frank was installed in 2002 at a human rights memorial and park in Boise, Idaho, and his baseball paintings have hung in an exhibit at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York.

At the height of his painting career, before turning his attention to sculpture, Stone continued to create portraits of homeless and working-class people, showing them in various places, including exhibits with the R. Michelson Galleries. "I want people to look at the homeless not as sick or useless but as people who are human beings like every one of us," Stone told a Gazette reporter in 1992.

Michelson said the portraits of homeless people captured this respect. "He wanted to give them dignity and make them feel they were worthy," he said. "There was no irony. There was no judgment. As important, he got to know them. They became friends and that is his legacy."

Once word of Stone's illness spread this summer, Michelson said people began asking to see his work. Four paintings were positioned near the door of the 132 Main St. gallery and remain there this weekend. One shows five men in a subway station singing a cappella, another a shoemaker surrounded by cubbies filled with his wares.

The pieces, though colorful, reach for the mood underneath what he was studying; Stone's work in general reminds Michelson of the work of French Post-Impressionist Paul Cezanne.

"He was always playing with light and shadow and testing the limits of that. ... His paintings are very sculptural in and of themselves," Michelson said in an interview at his business Friday.

Paul Gulla, the R. Michelson Galleries manager, said Stone's paintings may appear simple, but they are not. "It's actually a very sophisticated painting style," Gulla said.

Still active

Charlie Miller of Northampton, a longtime friend who visited Stone on Tuesday, said the artist had been creating work almost to the end, using a portable easel set up in the kitchen of the Hatfield condo where he was living.

In August, friends and supporters donated to a crowdfunding site to help offset costs related to Stone's diagnosis of Stage 4 colon cancer. Stone said at the time that the support would allow him to continue working.

In a June post on his Facebook page, Stone shared pictures of himself painting on Monhegan Island in Maine. He also traveled to Cape Cod. His last major show in the area was taken down Thursday at the Hampshire County Courthouse.

"He was resting comfortably and never was in any pain," Miller said.

Bobbo Bowen, a close friend for the last three years, had been driving Stone to locations where he could paint. His last excursion with his paints was a week ago. "He absolutely loved that," Bowen said. "He painted up a storm."

"To me he was a kind of person who had relationships with the homeless folks on the street as well as company presidents and brain surgeons. There were no boundaries," Bowen said. "He was a person who just loved humanity. All of it."

The two met through their hairdresser, Bowen said, who thought they ought to know one another; they became romantically involved. She said in a follow-up text that Stone's death leaves "a huge hole" for all who knew him. "I am so grateful that we were together. He was a gentle, patient, sincere man with a heart of gold. He was an artist who stayed true to himself, his goals and ideals.

"And he was such a storyteller himself. He had a great capacity to share them and make people laugh," she said.

Leaving legacy

Nancy Donato, owner of J. Rich Clothing for Men, at 153 Main St. in Northampton, became friends with Stone when she moved to the city in 1973. She said in an email, in response to questions from the Gazette, that she's glad his art will live on.

"What better legacy could he have left than the body of work he created and the relationships that meant so much to him," she wrote. "Greg embraced everyone he encountered regardless of their position. He created a community of friends that

seemed unlimited in number. His work was a reflection of the compassion he had for people and his interest in their stories. Each one as important as the next.”

One of Stone’s friends from Athol High School, Michael Lundquist, says people may have mistaken Stone’s laid-back manner for a casual attitude about his art. Not so. “Since I’ve known him he’s painted or done some sort of work every day for hours,” he said. “His art speaks for itself. He worked at his craft constantly.”

Lundquist said a key change came for Stone when he confronted his drinking in his 40s, at the time when he returned to school to earn a master’s degree in sculpture. “There was a huge change in him and his art.”

Later, Lundquist invited Stone to serve on the board of the nonprofit he runs, the Polus Center for Social and Economic Development Inc., which is devoted to providing prosthetic limbs to underprivileged people around the world, often in war zones. Stone traveled to countries to document the experience of people the foundation helps.

Lundquist said Stone has always been passionate about social justice, “and he lived it.” He recalled a time when he noticed that a blanket and pillow had been laid out in a hall outside Stone’s former studio at 199 Main St. in Northampton.

He asked Stone why and was told it was for someone who didn’t have a place to sleep. “I think he modeled that for other people,” Lundquist said.

Judith Fine, former owner of Gazebo in Northampton and a longtime friend of the artist, saw Stone repeatedly over the summer and visited him early this week. “He was doing fantastic until just a couple weeks ago,” she said.

Fine said Stone opened his eyes and squeezed her hand as she shared word with him that she is determined to have lighting placed to illuminate the sculpture on Main Street of an owl that he created for the late Eva Trager, a mutual friend.

“Stoney was a friend to everyone,” Fine said. “Especially the little man. He was moved by the plight of the less fortunate. He depicted them with dignity.”

Downtown presence

For years, Stone was a presence downtown, largely due to his personal charisma, Fine said. She said he possessed “just a sensuous, physical ability to make you feel good. That ability to connect with people is what has resonated with so many. He just came across that way.”

“His work will live on because it is moving and touches you,” Fine said. “What better wish could you have than that your life’s passion lives on and keeps affecting people?”

Lisa Thompson, associate director of the APE Gallery at 126 Main St., organized an exhibit of Stone’s work in 2013.

“He was such an anchor of the artistic culture of Northampton for so long,” she said. “And such an amazing painter — a true painter. He really worked at it. The work is just beautiful. Stunning.”

Though accomplished in his trade, Stone didn’t elevate himself above others, Thompson said. “He didn’t have any airs about himself. He wasn’t driven by selling. He definitely marched to his own drumbeat. Nobody was going to constrain him. In that was he was so authentic.”

Michelson, his former representative, said Stone could have become wealthy through his art, with commissions, but elected to follow his “inner passion.”

“He didn’t want to give up his independence by having to please his audience or particular artistic patrons, even though he had offers to do so. He had his inner light.”

Michelson added, “He gave back to the community. He took care of the community. And he put his money where his mouth is.”

In his words

In a 1981 interview with Gazette reporter Suzanne Wilson, Stone, then 34, explained why, more and more, he was taking his studio painting techniques out onto the street to capture the inhabitants of a city in transition.

His studio at 199 Main St., the one where he occasionally made a space for a homeless man, was crowded with finished canvases, but he had not yet found a way to earn his living through art alone. He continued to work in construction and as a housepainter.

He defended Northampton as a place to paint, saying, “You can paint anywhere you are. It’s all right there. You know, I wouldn’t like it if this was like — what’s that place in Washington? Georgetown — no, don’t want a place like that.”

He distanced himself from the realists then making names for themselves as painters in Northampton. “I’m just doing what I’ve been doing for years. Sure, they’re real – to me, anyway.”

He gestured at his works. “I don’t paint exactly what I see. You change things, exaggerate things like color or line. That’s what painting is – part imagination. When I’m doing a landscape, the light changes, the wind changes, smells and sounds change. The ones who use only their cameras lose that.”

Stone told Wilson that he’d like to earn enough money from painting to live on and to take care of family and friends, but not much more. “Even if I make money, my style of living isn’t going to change. I don’t know a whole lot of wealthy people, never really been around them. I could just do bigger and better work, get a car so I could do more landscapes, that kind of thing. It’s all pretty simple. Your business – your life – is to paint. So you paint.”

Thirty-two years later, in an interview with this reporter, Stone was asked about his recent paintings and drawings in Holyoke. He’d stopped painting street scenes in Northampton.

“It’s a different city than it was,” he said, citing Northampton’s gentrification. “It’s a little on the gritty side,” he said of Holyoke, “Which is fine with me.”

Last piece

Before Thanksgiving, Stone’s last commissioned sculpture will be installed on the courthouse lawn. Todd Ford, executive director of the Hampshire Council of Governments, said Stone won a commission to create a work paid for by an anonymous \$30,000 donation. A wax model was sent just days ago to a foundry.

The work depicts a young girl hold an injured dove. “He wanted something that looked forward and honored the next generation for their compassion and hopefulness,” Ford said.

“She’s nurturing the dove,” Bowen said of the work. “It’s about peace and hope for the future, through our children.”

Ford plans to convene a program honoring Stone when the sculpture is dedicated later this fall. “I loved working with him,” Ford said. “I get emotional that it’s something that’s yet to be seen by everyone.”