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GWU Senior Elisa Beekman Reflects on the Fragments that Fuel Artistic Expression

A memory is a tricky thing. Though grounded in *real* experience, a memory is changed—fragmented, filtered, colored and shaped—by the very process of remembering. A memory is both old and new, both known and powerfully mysterious. Indeed, memory is art—and the pictures our remembering produces are the masterpieces of our lives.

Just ask Gardner-Webb’s Elisa Beekman. The senior art education major recently won a prestigious Nolle Scholarship at the Alpha Chi National Honor Society conference in Baltimore, Md., for a collection of collages, acrylic paintings and watercolors inspired by memories from her childhood—a childhood most Americans can’t even imagine.

Beekman grew up in Papua, Indonesia, an archipelago nation of 13,000 islands full of tropical rainforests and volcanic mountains, teeming cities and tribal villages, where more than 170 million people speak over 250 languages. Though technically an American (Beekman’s parents are American missionaries in Indonesia), Beekman was born in Papua and lived there almost exclusively until she moved to the U.S. as a 19-year-old to attend Gardner-Webb, where she is preparing to teach art in the North Carolina schools and, eventually, in an international school for missionary kids.

“Sometimes I forget that most Americans just don’t understand my childhood,” she says. “It’s not their fault. They just don’t know what Papua looks like. With my artwork, my motivation is really to share those experiences and help others better understand who I am. Hopefully, as they look at my art, they’ll get a little glimpse of what I’ve seen, and they’ll see the glory of God in it.”

A lifelong artist, Beekman’s memory is a *mélange* of hues, textures, sounds and associations from her childhood in Papua, a mental tapestry that motives both the product and the process of her artistic creation. That blend is best exemplified in one of her favorite styles, the collage.

“With collage, I work with fragments, putting them in and taking them out, all while looking for clarity. That’s just like what I do when I recollect my childhood, with all its fragments that make me who I am,” Beekman says.

The centerpiece of the Nolle Scholarship collection, “Self-Portrait,” is a collage that blends pieces of hand-stained tissue paper, fragments from magazines, portions of Beekman’s journals and pictures from her sketchbook into a stunning portrait of Beekman, gazing downward in contemplation, against the backdrop of the lush Papuan landscape. Forming the sky are her father’s airplane (he is a jungle pilot), a picture of her older brother, childhood letters, a plane ticket to Asia, and a map of Indonesia. Adorning her neck are Papuan beads, a symbol of Beekman’s spiritual connection to the Papuan people.

“It’s interesting how abstract and fluid memories are. I start with a picture—an idea of what I want to accomplish—but as I work with it, I think of deeper meanings, relationships between different memories, things happening in the present that are tied to the past. The work becomes a new thing entirely. That’s precisely how ‘Self-Portrait’ developed.”

The result, Beekman says, reflects her inherently “fragmented identity” as an American in Papua, a Papuan in America, and ultimately, as Christian who, in the words of C.S. Lewis, was “made for another world.” Taken alone, no one piece tells her story. Taken together, the fragments cohere to form a masterpiece.

For more information about art education at Gardner-Webb, contact Professor Doug Knotts at 704-406-3812, or Professor Susan Bell at 704-406-4473.

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