

# 'Facing Forward.' This North Georgia artist is responding to society's expectations of women, personal challenges through solo exhibit



Gena Brodie Robbins installs her exhibit Monday, Aug. 9, 2021, at the Quinlan Visual Arts Center. Her exhibit, Facing Forward, concerns the expectations of women in society as well as her experiences with grief and loss. - photo by Scott Rogers

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Faces of iconic women will soon grace the walls of the Quinlan Visual Arts Center in Gainesville, each wearing relaxed expressions tied with a sexist slur.

These 36 paintings — which include Princess Diana, former First Lady Michelle Obama, Emma Watson, Anna Kendrick and others — are a part of a series connected to Gena Brodie Robbins' solo exhibit "Facing Forward." The artist will hold the opening night for the gallery from 5:30-7 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 12, and it will be available for public viewing through Saturday, Oct. 2.

While Robbins' exhibit exposes pieces of her life like grief and dealing with a chronic illness through a large range of art media, she said it also touches on the expectations of women in society.

A few years ago, Robbins, who currently lives in Suwanee, said she was diagnosed with myasthenia gravis, a chronic illness that causes facial muscle weakness. During flare-ups with her condition, she isn't able to control portions of her face.

"I used to joke and say, 'Gosh, I have the worst resting b---- face you've ever seen,'" Robbins said. " ... I started thinking about the

expectations of women, and how they're expected to smile and have a pretty face.”

Robbins said she began to draw images of her face during her flare-ups, and also felt inspired to paint portraits of famous women known for having “RBF.”

To the right of the entrance at the Quinlan, people will see vibrant spheres hanging from the ceiling, each covered with quotes from these women in interviews regarding their expressions. Some of the balls include questions asked to Robbins about her face.

“There’s one from Simone Biles (Olympic gymnast),” Robbins said, sifting through the spheres above her head. “It says, ‘Smiling doesn’t win you gold medals.’”

Robbins’ exhibit also showcases multiple large-scale works in oil and mixed media, sculptures, wax impressions of faces and several interactive elements, including a video that can be viewed by scanning a QR code. People will be able to watch interviews of famous women being asked about their expressions and also learn about the meaning behind certain pieces of art.

Robbins said the 90-something works displayed in “Facing Forward” were created over a 2.5-year period, many of which were made during the pandemic. The artist said her mother recently died from cancer, sharing the same fate as her father. With both parents gone, Robbins said she was faced with heavy grief, loss and isolation.

Grabbing her artist tools, she responded to those emotions.



Gena Brodie Robbins unpacks her art pieces Monday, Aug. 9, 2021, at the Quinlan Visual Arts Center. Her exhibit, Facing Forward, concerns the expectations of women in society. - photo by Scott Rogers

“I think as an artist, one of your natural instincts is to react,” Robbins said. “Whatever medium you’re using, that’s what helps you to move from whatever it is in here, and taking the intangible and making it tangible.”

In many of Robbins’ paintings in the exhibit, people will notice faceless figures surrounded by streaks of colors, each invoked by a certain feeling from the artist. Flashes of bright orange, pink and other spray-painted hues pierce through the dark marks on the canvases.

Robbins said she needed to add those fluorescent colors to help “get back on that positive path.” And, in doing so, she was able to heal.

me out of all the negativity,” she said. “... I feel like I’ve finally gotten through it all and have accepted it.”

Robbins, who has a master’s degree in painting from Savannah College of Art & Design, said if people take anything away from her exhibit, she wants them to “be immersed and at least have a reaction.”

“I don’t know if it will be a positive or a negative one,” she said. “Hopefully they won’t be indifferent. I just want people to connect. That’s it.”

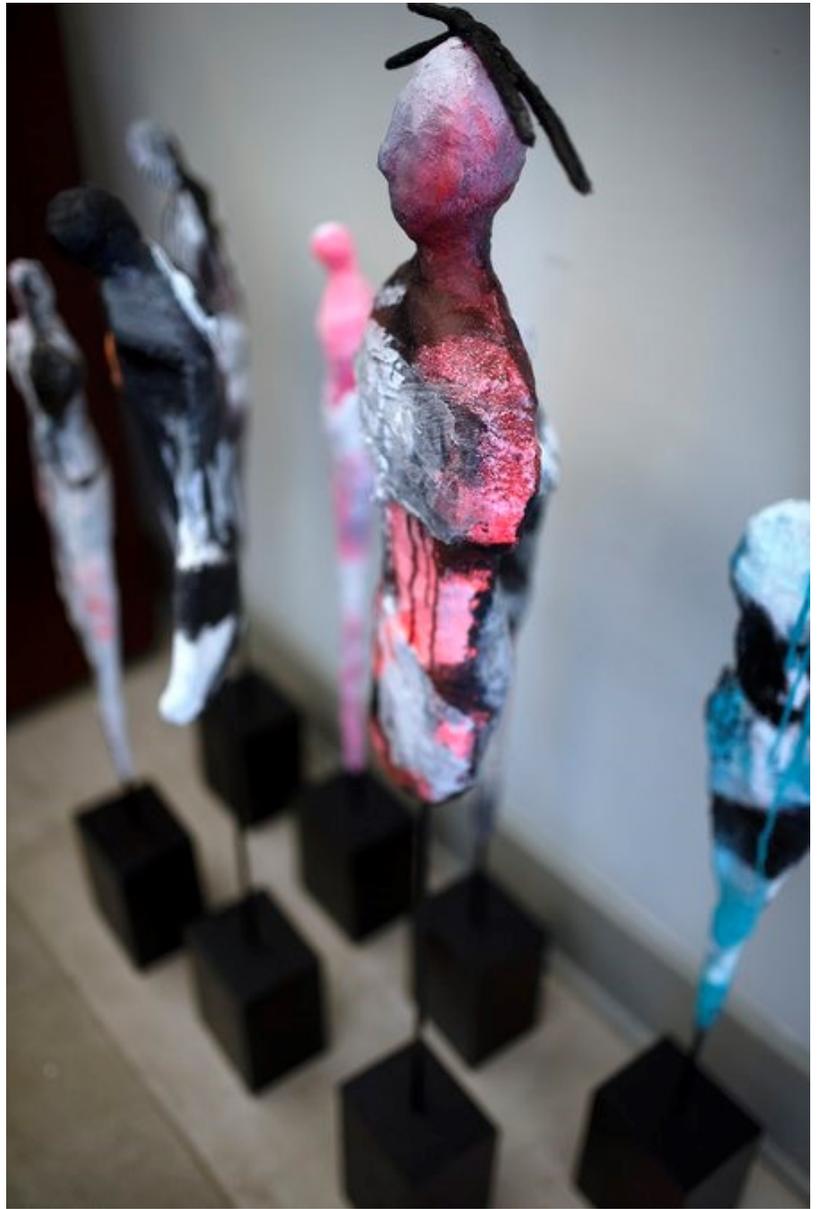
All pieces displayed at “Facing Forward” will be for sale. The Quinlan’s hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. The art center is closed on Sundays.

“It was like a therapy that was so arresting and so bright that it jarred



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photo by Scott Rogers



Sculptures by Gena Brodie Robbins are ready to display Monday, Aug. 9, 2021, at the Quinlan Visual Arts Center. Her exhibit, Facing Forward, concerns the expectations of women in society and her experiences with grief and loss. - photo by Scott Rogers