

"I wanted to be able to reveal something new to them in a way they had never seen before."

NICOLE WOLFE

# ACTUALITÉS

## Photographer pays homage to island roots with exhibit

**Arts** Grand Manan native unveils Sea of Faces, a tribute to the local lobster fishermen

MIKE LANDRY  
TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

GRAND MANAN – When Nicole Wolfe was 18 years old, she left Grand Manan and didn't return.

It was a rarity on the island even in the late 1980s and early '90s, especially going as far as Wolfe did – all the way to Indiana for an undergraduate degree. Out of her high school graduating class of 20 students there may have been one other student who said goodbye to the island.

But she never forgot her childhood, family or heritage. Her first exhibition, Sea of Faces, is a tribute to the island's lobster fishermen like her father. The 24 photographs in the show were taken during the past four Novembers during the opening of the lobster season.

In 2009, Wolfe's work won the World in Focus contest sponsored by Photo District News and National Geographic's contest. The series is on display until Friday at the Grand Manan Island Art Gallery.

"A lot of times, when people shoot fishermen or landscapes in the Maritimes, it's more of a typical approach – they're shooting lighthouses and boats and things like that, that are postcard friendly," Wolfe said by phone from Washington, D.C. "I knew that when I started this series I really wanted to dive into the community and the people I grew up with."

Sea of Faces marks a shift in Wolfe's photography career. She had primarily been working as a commercial photographer based in Washington. Since 2001, Wolfe along with her husband and a friend had been operating SOTA Dzine, a commercial photography and design company with offices in Washington and Chicago.

Although she has been photographing Grand Manan for years, it was one haphazardly shot photo that set the course for Sea of Faces. It was taken at night with a fisherman staring straight at the lens. Wolfe knew as soon as she developed the photograph that this was the fine art series she had been looking to start – portraits of lobster fisherman at night.

She ended widening her focus, but nighttime portraits remained the meat of the project.

"There was just a different type of intimacy – it's dark and foreboding. It really allowed me to pinpoint into who they were, what they were doing and their emotional connection and personalities by not being distracted by a lot going on the background. It focused inward on them."

Such raw emotion wasn't easy to capture. She wanted her work to be intimate and close, and her subjects were rugged, tough men with restrained emotions who weren't used to either having a woman on the boat or a camera in their face.

But Wolfe "grew up on boats" and was up to the challenge. There's a fishing heritage on both sides of her family going back to when her relatives first settled on the island in the mid-1800s. As a youngster, Wolfe was recruited by her dad a few times to help out on opening day and there wasn't a summer she can remember growing up that wasn't spent sailing on the boat.

Wolfe says it's interesting to look back on her heritage, given where she's ended up.

"To come from the place that I came from, such a small, very family-oriented community, if it hadn't been for my mom and dad pushing me to succeed when I was a teenager and giving me the opportunity, I probably would have stayed on Grand Manan."

But her small-town friendliness has played a role in her work off the island. She's always been connected to other people. It's something that runs in her family. Her grandfather Oliver Green is known on the island as 'Smiles.'

"A typical photojournalist is someone who steps back and observes and is not involved emotionally. For me, I can't do that. It's very hard for me to take a photograph of someone and not say anything."

Dennis Green, the mayor of Grand Manan, has known Wolfe all her life. He attended the opening of Sea of Faces and was impressed by the work and the love she has for the island's fishing heritage.

"It just impresses upon you what a hard



NICOLE WOLFE

A Grand Manan fisherman tends his traps, above, in this image by photographer Nicole Wolfe. Wolfe, a native of Grand Manan, recently held an exhibit, Sea of Faces, on the island.

life fishing is," Green said.

"A lot of people only see the money they make, but they put in a lot of time and through all kinds of conditions, and the price has been down, and it means they have to put that much more time in trying to make a dollar."

"I sometimes get fairly sentimental when I talk about Grand Mananers who have gone on to the mainland and excelled in their field, and she most certainly has," the mayor said. "A lot of people leave Grand Manan and a lot of people refer to them as 'former Grand Mananers' but Nicole will never be a former Grand Mananer."

During the opening reception for Sea of Faces, with the Grand Manan Island Art Gallery full of family and friends, Wolfe was more nervous than if she was showing the work to an art critic or teacher.

"Out of all of the work I've ever done for magazines, ad agencies and people's half-million dollar weddings, that stuff doesn't stress me out, but this does because it's vulnerable – I'm showing the most intimate part of who I am," she said.

"I wanted them to feel like I repre-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Nicole Wolfe and her grandfather, island legend, Oliver 'Smiles' Green.

sented them well, and that it didn't feel contrived. That it felt raw and authentic ... I wanted to be able to reveal something new to them in a way they had never seen before."

Wolfe says their response, generally just

a simple, "You did a good job," was heartwarming.

"They weren't describing it the way that an art critic would, but the way that they were responding was exactly what I was hoping for."