

Exhibit Showcases a Who's Who of Quad Cities Artists

Written by Jodie Shagrin Kavensky
Tuesday, 30 March 2004 18:00

Move over Oscar, Emmy, and Grammy. It's time to bestow honors upon the Quad Cities' artistic community. The 28th Annual Rock Island Fine Arts Exhibition boasts a roster that reads like a venerable who's who of local visual artists. Works by Bruce Carter, Corrine Smith, Teresa Mesich, Jeanne Tamisiea, and Megan and Kristin Quinn (to name a few) have made the cut for this year's exhibition, opening April 3 at Augustana College's Centennial Hall. (See sidebar for the award winners.)

It's an eclectic mix of ceramics, fibers, photographs, oils, watercolors, woodcuts, and collages, along with a host of other artistic media. The collection of 67 works pulls from a wide cross-section of subject matters, from classical to humorous to abstract. But this diversity produces a positive energy that speaks volumes about the art in our region.

That range created a challenge for juror Lin Nelson-Mayson, director of ExhibitsUSA in Kansas City. "There's a lot of strong art in these parts," she told the small crowd at her juror presentation. But jurying the exhibition was also a treat, she said, because she gained tremendous insight into our community. In discussing the exhibit, she cited the richness of our region's artistic base, stressed the importance of regionalist art, and applauded our community's long tradition of supporting the arts. She knows what she's talking about, too, with more than 20 years' experience as a curator, board member, and juror for several major arts organizations.

Nelson-Mayson was brought in by Sherry Maurer, director of the Augustana College Art Museum. The two women met as art students at Miami University in Ohio, and Maurer has repeatedly invited her to jury the show throughout the years. Nelson-Mayson's participation this year couldn't be more timely, because Maurer is celebrating her 20th year as organizer of the exhibition.

But how does one go about choosing the *crème de la crème* from almost 300 entries? Even the exhibition's organizers, Augustana College and The Rock Island Art Guild, admit it was a broad call for entries with no criteria beyond works' size and artists' age and residency. (Applicants must live within 150 miles of the Quad Cities.) Most exhibits, Nelson-Mayson said, have a much narrower focus, and jurying this show was a daunting job, indeed. Just as a wine sommelier must detect the subtlest nuances of a grape varietal, the juror for this exhibition must possess a connoisseur's eye. And, both demand impartiality and a well-trained palate (or palette, as the case may be).

Adopting a simple approach is best, she insisted, because "strong work just pops out." But Nelson-Mayson also admitted to studying the details of each piece to ascertain how well the artist met specific challenges. What was the artist's intent, and was it met? Is there coherence in the composition? Was there consistency in the execution of the vision? Could she find strength in the message and its medium?

But this is art, I argue. It's not like judging a prize heifer, where you go down a checklist. Isn't the critique of – and appreciation for – art extremely subjective? Everyone is biased toward a particular subject, style, or medium. Declaring one work better than another is somewhat akin to a crapshoot. Especially so, considering what she based most of her choices on – a 35-millimeter slide, where flatness prevails, texture disappears, dimensions blur, and all artists

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are anonymous. Plus, when she actually sees the piece, it often communicates differently. Was it her perception or the artist's intent that had changed?

Still, although I didn't understand a few selected works (namely Robertus van der Wege's *Medieval Sex Toys* and Don Bulucos' *And I Didn't Even Know Your Name*), I agreed with her judgment for the most part. I also know several pieces were dropped from the exhibit at the last minute.

I tend to gravitate toward the more surreal, abstract, and whimsical pieces in my appreciation of eye candy. A few of my favorite works were Pamela Bradner Ohnemus' *The Tall Grass Prairie 2*, Jim Riesberg's *Day Dreams of a Cow*, and John Vellenga's *Laura*. They didn't win any prizes, but they sure were fun to look at. Isn't that what art is all about, anyway?

All in all, Nelson-Mayson has succeeded in assembling a vibrant and cohesive collection. It's an exhibit that reflects the enormous integrity of our artistic community (almost half of the pieces are by Quad Cities residents). Many Midwestern themes appear throughout, but it's also a showcase for a lot that easily transcends regional barriers. The bottom line is that this year's exhibition, with 75 percent framed art and 25 percent sculptural art, shouldn't be missed. And, as an artist, Nelson-Mayson has met the challenge of what she set out to do.

The 28th Annual Rock Island Fine Arts Exhibition runs April 3 to 25, with an opening reception and awards presentation on April 7 at 4:30 p.m. A majority of the artwork is available for sale.

Rock Island Fine Arts Exhibition Winners

Juror Lin Nelson-Mayson has announced the winners of the 28th Annual Rock Island Fine Arts Exhibition. Here we share her thoughts on what makes each winning work so outstanding, along with a brief description of the piece.

First Prize (\$1,000): William Howard from Macomb, Illinois, for his etching series *12 Heads*. This grouping of 12 etchings concentrates on one element – the back of the head – but communicates to us through a variation on a theme. While it's an object we typically take for granted, the repetition of a seemingly simple image pushes us to make comparisons within the group.

Second Place (\$500): Michael Mahoney from Macomb, Illinois, for his watercolor on lithograph *Artemisia*. This small piece focuses on the artist making art and is a quiet vignette with a presence much larger than its size would suggest. It has a lovely circular composition and uses color to suggest an inner dialogue between the artist and the figure he has created.

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Third Place (\$300): Corrine Smith of Rock Island, for her mixed media piece *3-D Vocabulary #1*. There is a marvelous encounter with texture within this piece, which thrives on a dynamic form of asymmetry. The use of collage and overlapping paint techniques are aggressive and create a sense of high drama.

Honorable Mentions (five awards at \$100):

S.K. Arkins of Dubuque, Iowa, for her daguerreotype photography *Modulus Relic No. 4 (Toothbrush)*. This tiny piece (small enough to fit in your hand) is a tribute to a pristine art form we don't see much of these days. An intricately carved box enhances the daguerreotype image of a toothbrush and an everyday item clearly becomes a precious memory of a past luxury.

David Heffner of North Liberty, Iowa, for his gelatin silver print *Untitled*. This picture is a perfect example of how creative camera angles and varying focusing techniques can produce a sense of mystery. Dramatic tension battles with clarity, and a faceless mask begs us to question the issue of what we see versus what we don't see.

Samuel Johnson of Iowa City, Iowa, for his wood-fired stoneware. This coiled and paddled vase is a classic vessel shape, but an interesting turn of the hand and the fortunate outcome of firing make it stand out. It's a harmonious piece, where color and shape blend together to create a bit of motion.

Louise Kames, BVM, of Dubuque, Iowa, for her pastel on paper *New Bliss Tree Gall*. This piece thrives on a balanced tension between occupied and unoccupied space. A highly detailed work of abnormal plant growth, it implies more texture than actually exists. The object's clarity creates an untold depth and draws the eye in for additional scrutiny.

Margaret Whiting of Waterloo, Iowa, for her wall sculpture from altered law books *Commentaries on American Law (The General Rule)*. Attractive and intriguing, this piece demonstrates how fully the artist appreciates the inherent beauty of her medium. With its creative use of text and patterns, it becomes a subtly humorous commentary with a theme that floats throughout its elements.

Nelson-Mayson also chose the winner of the Sally MacMillan Watercolor Award, which was introduced for the first time this year. George Olsen of Woodhull, Illinois, won for his pencil and watercolor painting *Prairie Plants (Winter)*. This particular piece, despite a limited palette of colors, stood out as a challenging botanical narrative within a traditional use of media. By grouping together a number of related plant species, the piece evokes a lovely melody that works well within its own artistic limitations.

The Children's Choice and People's Choice awards will be announced immediately before the exhibition closes at 4 p.m. on April 25.