

New Gallery Boosts Arts Energy in The District

Written by Michael LoGuidice
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With the opening of MidCoast Gallery West, the arts energy in the Rock Island District is, as Emeril Lagasse says, bam: taken up a notch. The gallery is located at the corner of 17th Street and 2nd Avenue and is paired with the ArtFX Gallery, and both sit a mere half-block from the Glass Impact glassblowing studio.

I visited all three venues last Saturday morning, and it was a thoroughly enjoyable two hours. I saw a glassblowing class at Glass Impact, the two-artist show of Ralph Iaccarino and Jay Stratton at MidCoast, and a great selection of works from some of the best artists in the Quad Cities at ArtFX. I made no appointments; these were just the activities that happened to be going on.

John Watts is the proprietor of Glass Impact at 1611 2nd Avenue, and his selection of artistic glass works is among the best I've seen. I listened to part of a glassblowing lecture Watts was giving to a class of six students, and I was impressed by his knowledge and ability to clearly explain the techniques and processes of glassblowing. Besides, it's impressive to watch glass melt in a furnace and then take shape before your eyes at the end of the glassblower's pipe and punty rod.

ArtFX owner Donna Lee has assembled work from a group that reads like a who's who of local artists. From the pottery of Akiko Koiso to the wood turnings of Steve Sinner, from the sculpture of Vernon "Skip" Willits to Kathleen Lawless Cox's calligraphy and original poetry, the works span the spectrum of the visual arts. Other artists include Angela Beth Clark, Corrine Smith, Bob Brehmer, Kathleen VanHyfte, Lisa Dingledden Richards, and Phil Richards. Lee keeps the artwork in an affordable price range for the Quad City consumer, and the prices are below what you would pay in Chicago, New York, or Santa Fe for works of similar quality.

The MidCoast West show featuring Jay Stratton and Ralph Iaccarino is an update of the show hung in summer 2001 at the MidCoast Fine Arts Gallery at the LeClaire welcome center. Both men are capable, professional, and polished artists, and the show includes new works by each.

Iaccarino has 21 paintings and two giclee prints in this show, ranging in price from \$175 to \$7,500 each. He has a very mature style that emphasizes intertwining patterns and organic shapes, and it is this pairing that makes the *Biomorphic Gearhead* paintings an interesting visual juxtaposition. "My paintings are intended to elevate the human condition on physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual levels," Iaccarino writes in his artist statement. "For as long as I can remember, I have had a palpable sense of the magical, a strong intuition that there is more than what we see. Man's evolutionary process has raced toward the concrete, the pragmatic, the controllable, and the immediate. I chose to think in a divergent way and try not to set limits or boundaries." By juxtaposing reality with intertwining shapes in his work, the unseen and the lack of limits are given a unique expression.

Stratton's woodworking is exquisite, and this show features 30 excellent pieces. From decorative works such as *In the Name of Love* to functional yet unconventional furniture, Stratton's work is masterful. The pieces are bargains, too, ranging from \$120 to \$7,400, with most of them in the \$500 to \$1,200 range. You would be hard-pressed to find higher-quality

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work for many times the price.

You can get a feel for Stratton's love of woodworking from his artist's statement: "When it comes to carving that idea into wood, I have to let the wood flow. Wood is alive, and I believe you have to be able to feel that life and move with it for the piece to work and be pleasing to the eye." Stratton's artist objects make you want to spend time with them.