

Different Type of High-School Reunion

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 24 May 2005 18:00

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Most of us have had the experience of running into someone who went to school with us years earlier. Very little, if anything, usually comes of those chance encounters. But for local artists Nicole Miller and Justin Elvidge, both 22, a surprise meeting has led, a mere four months later, to a shared exhibit of oil paintings at the Peanut Gallery in Rock Island, the first local showing for both Quad Citians.

“We went to high school together,” Miller says of Elvidge, “but we didn’t know each other. It wasn’t until a night this January, when a friend from Rocky [Rock Island High School] introduced us, that we even *realized* we went to school together.” Intrigued by their shared interest in the arts, Miller and Elvidge quickly became friends, and within weeks, they embarked on a plan to have their artwork displayed locally. That plan comes to fruition with the duo’s one-night-only exhibit May 28 at the Peanut Gallery at 300 21st Street. The show runs from 6 p.m. to midnight.

Stylistically, the two couldn’t be more different; as Miller says, “I do incredibly traditional subject matter, and Justin is more art for art’s sake.” Miller’s primary focus is on realistic, yet slightly exaggerated, oil-on-canvas compositions, many in the tradition of Lucian Freud, while Elvidge leans more toward abstraction, with bold, vibrant colors and an intensity that brings to mind Picasso via Munch.

Yet the two found that, despite their contrasting styles, they had similar feelings about what they admired – and hated – in art. “There were a lot of ‘let’s talk about stuff we like’ conversations,” says Miller of their initial acquaintanceship.

“A lot of young people don’t take art very seriously,” Elvidge adds. “We *do*.”

The road to Elvidge’s and Miller’s unofficial high-school reunion, however, involved separate paths. A self-described outsider artist, Elvidge says his interest in painting began when he was 10, “and it just kept getting bigger since then.” (And this is not a merely figurative statement: One of his works is painted on a nine-by-15-foot canvas, and numerous others are over six-feet

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When he left the Quad Cities after high school, Elvidge first tried his hand at the Portland art scene. Despite having no formal training, he worked on a few shows during his stay in Oregon, but success was slow in coming. Elvidge says, dryly, “I basically painted on purses” before returning to the Quad Cities.

Like Elvidge, Miller’s artistic interest began when she was young, but unlike her friend, Miller *has* received formal training, earning a bachelor’s degree in painting from the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. She also finds herself drawn more toward realism than her colleague, as her series of portraits suggests. “I’ve always thought the most complex form in nature is the human form,” she says, “and I try to capture that complexity. There’s a certain feeling you get from portraiture that’s unlike anything else in art.”

Though their styles and histories differ, Elvidge and Miller agree that, for many young people, the experience of attending an art show can be intimidating. They also admit that, oftentimes, the venues themselves keep potential visitors away – “A lot of art galleries are really dry,” Elvidge says – which is why both artists are thrilled about their exhibit at the Peanut Gallery, which will feature, in addition to the artwork itself, the band Intensity! playing for the event. “Some people,” says Elvidge, “have this preconceived idea of what an art show will be like – hors d’oeuvres, pictures of ducks on the wall, that kind of thing. It can be a lot more exciting than people think.”