

A MAGNUM OPUS

Mastery And Intrigue At VMRC's 18th Annual Juried Art Show

By JILLIAN LYNCH Daily News-Record
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Illinois artist Tony Armendariz won the VMRC Juried Art Show with a piece entitled "Feeding Nairobi."

Daniel Lin / DN-R

It's possible to spend hours at the Park Gables Gallery at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community, taking in the masterful and meaningful works of the 18th annual Juried Art Exhibition.

A whimsical quilt called "Root Vegetables," by Carly Lowe, made with 3,400 French knots adorned a walled seating area, while a diorama entitled "Close Encounter" by Christina Williams depicted a young explorer and robot made of everyday objects in front of a large window.

While some works were imaginative, others were imbued with the emotion and struggle of the pandemic year.

Plates of art glass with vibrant, then washed-out colors called "Alternate Universes" by Larry Mitchell illustrated the juxtaposition of life before and during the pandemic, while a photograph entitled "Cyprus Dreams" by D.M. Fulks represented the inspiration he found in nature while quarantining.

The strongest example of pandemic sentiment was reflected in the watercolor entitled "Feeding Nairobi" by Tony Armendariz of Palatine, Ill., that was unanimously voted by the judges to win the \$1,000 Best in Show award.

The watercolor depicts a realistic scene of a man with an anguished expression pushing a large cart of food and other belongings through the city. Armendariz saw the man in real life on a trip to Nairobi.

As a representational painter, Armendariz's goal is not simply to re-create a photograph, but to serve as a conduit between the viewer of the gallery and the subject of the photo on an emotional and human level.

"I want to put the viewer there, looking into the subject's eyes," Armendariz said. "I want people to see the subject in 'the wild,' as if they were on a safari."

Juror Chuck Almarez said the expression on the man's face, the technical quality of the watercolor, and the colors used led the three jurors to unanimously select Armendariz's painting for Best in Show.

"It's about the context," Almarez said. "This is someone who's clearly struggling."

The rest of the main floor gallery was filled with 101 diverse works of art from all over the country selected from over 400 submissions by a panel of three jurors across categories of painting, photography and 3D art.

The exhibition, in its 15th and final year under the direction of VMRC resident Anne Pauley, was open from May 31 to Wednesday both in person and online, after being held virtually in 2020.

Michael Hough, installation designer, thoughtfully installed pieces that echoed each other, such as a fiber art piece that cascaded to the ground and a 3D glass waterfall with a similar shape.

The art glass by Mitchell was displayed in front of bright windows to emphasize the colors used.

Hough said he noticed works that were influenced by the pandemic, whether they mentioned it in the title or had something in the composition.

"I hung three of them together because I saw the link," Hough said.

Pauley insists she's "not an artist," but has nearly encyclopedic knowledge about the works in the show and appreciates the story behind each piece as much as any artist would.

The South Carolina native steered clear of the spotlight and refused to have her picture taken, but offered humble gratitude for the artists who submitted their works before the 2021 show was confirmed.

"This may be a prejudiced statement," Pauley said, "but I think this is one of the best and most diverse art shows in the country. Of course, I can in no way substantiate that."

Pauley became director of the show when the position opened years ago, and her late husband encouraged her to take on the role.

"He was in the military, and when the colonel spoke, you listened," Pauley said.

Since then, she's developed a tight ship of an operation, with standard operating procedures for just about everything and commanding a team of event organizers, while eloquently serving as a point of contact and publicist for the event.

David Shombert, who will succeed Pauley as director in 2022, said she left protocols for the show moving forward.

Shombert, a wood turning enthusiast with two works in the show, pared down his large workshop from his previous home in West Virginia to fit in the garage of a home on VMRC's campus.

He said he'd like to incorporate more wood and 3D pieces in the show, but overall, he plans to continue in Pauley's footsteps.

Residents of retirement homes arguably had it the worst during the pandemic, and the works reflected that.

“Art is supposed to make you feel something,” Almarez said. “They say for social media, you have eight seconds to capture a viewer’s attention. If a work takes too long to find meaning in, people won’t be interested in it.”

Almarez said the experience taught him a lot about good art, and he said it was especially challenging to judge works from other forms than photography. It stretched him to judge pieces that weren’t photography, and said it brought him back to the basics of form, color and impact.

While the show is always made up of a diverse blend of artworks, Hough said he was impressed by how interesting and technically well-made the works in this show are.

“I don’t know if it’s because people had two years to work on [the art],” Hough said. “It’s embarrassing to say this, but this year was a stronger show.”



Contact Jillian Lynch at 574-6274 or jlynch@dnronline.com. Follow Jillian on Twitter [@lynchjillian_](https://twitter.com/lynchjillian_)

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