

1/16/2025 · Arts & Entertainment

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Kingstonwire

Lace Mill Exhibit Celebrates the Variety of Contemporary Painting

News By Bruce Schneider



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KINGSTON - In reflecting on his first encounter with poetry, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda brought this forward in “Memorial de Isla Negra” — “And it was at that age ... poetry arrived in search of me ... Something started in my soul, and I made my own way, deciphering that fire, and wrote the first faint line.”

A remarkable presentation currently up at the Lace Mill Gallery in Kingston features seven visual artists who made their first tentative strokes on canvas decades ago when art first arrived in search of these seven painters. In the more than 30 years since then, through the unseen and unspoken creative processes that have unfolded over time, each artist has developed a distinct voice in contemporary painting. Through serious dedication and rigor of their studio practice, the “9W Artists” have put together an exhibition that is technically outstanding as they redefine the essence of the medium into a showcase of works that challenge, provoke and inspire. Three pieces sold at the opening on Jan. 4.

The full title of the show is “9W Artists: While You Were Out.” All of the artists are from the Hudson Valley - 9W is a road that runs through the area. “While You Were Out” is a somewhat whimsical description of the artists’ lives. Each of the seven painters were people working hard behind the scenes. In the words of Edward O’Hara, one of the contributors, “While you were out living your lives, we were doing this work.”

Jill Ziccardi, an accomplished New York painter and educator, wanted to get together a group of contemporary painters and in 2024 she reached out to accomplished colleagues she had met over the years. “I wanted to put a shot in the arm for good painting,” Jill told me, “and try to assemble a group of people who were taking very different approaches to contemporary painting. We’re all painters, and we’ve all been painters for a really long time. We never made it into the so-called limelight, but we’re all still working and doing really good work.”

The artists she assembled found great benefit in meeting as a group. It brought the painters out of the isolation of working alone and also served the very valuable function of supporting each other.

“It started as a critique and support group,” O’Hara said. “Every artist needs that, because you’re working in a cave, all by yourself. You’re listening to your own music too much and you need outsiders you trust and respect to weigh in with love and to guide you in what you want to accomplish, what’s possible. My work got better as a result.”

In time, the group saw that they had an excellent body of diverse work and decided to put together an exhibit. They were approached by galleries and a curator who recognized the excellence of these contemporary painters, their virtuosity and intellect and their lifelong commitment to art.

Through several interviews with the artists, some fascinating stories came through — stories as diverse and interesting as the pieces themselves. We spoke about art as it influences social mores, art in connection with nature, the relationships between the artist, the painting and the viewer, and art as a transformative process.

Jill Ziccardi's work conveys an important social message while at the same time being edgy and humorous. "When I was in my twenties," she recalls, "I was in an elevator; a bunch of guys got in and they were taking about all these women they just met and one of them said, 'Hey did you meet that Suzie? She's a real hot little tomato.' A light bulb went off and to this day I'm still working off of that experience."

Ziccardi's work raises the question of language and how playful and yet potentially harmful terms affect the way we think about others. One of her paintings at the show is called "Bunny." Ziccardi lifted the image from a Playboy magazine and in her satirical way painted the image on a canvas made of fabric full of bunnies intended for a child's room with toy bunnies on the frame edge. "The term that I'm turning on its head dictates the subject matter or the image."

O'Hara is an abstract painter. His studio practice "is about my notions of what the universe looked like when it was forming." His work was good but not as honest and real as he wanted it to be. O'Hara lives on a farm; one morning he was looking out the window and the fields were flowing in a wave-like pattern. In that moment, he said, he discovered "this is what I want to do. I want to get into the fractal design that nature presents. I laid down some grass, put water-based paint on it carefully with a brush. I pressed. I lifted it and it was God's work."

In some of his pieces, hands can be seen pressing the paper down. There are four to six layers of paint on each surface. "I'm the facilitator collaborating with nature."

Archil Pichkhadze is in love with the visual world. "For me," he said, "the most important part of making a painting is the act of looking. Careful observation leads to sustained moments of clarity. In these moments I can move beyond preconceptions, experiencing things mundane as magical." Pichkhadze pulls together disparate elements, as a surrealist does. He takes photographs and sometimes puts them together, coming up with a composite.

“That’s the starting point,” he told me. “Often these things change and the painting becomes what it wants to be, how the painting itself wants it to work.” There is humor and mystery in his skillfully crafted paintings. There are elements of the history of the piece and a lot that’s open to suggestion. “I love the idea of suggesting a story,” Pichkhadze told me, “so that whoever is looking at the picture creates their own narrative and their own story.”

The soft-focus appearance the paintings of Leticia Ortega-Cortes are seen in beautiful portraits and other works in which one of the subjects is her granddaughter. Dionisio Cortes creates works of abstraction and realism, using 2D and 3D imagery emphasizing “the possibility of architecture where space is dynamic and stable, emerging and receding, yet unpredictable.” In Polly Reina’s work chaos is at the forefront. “Our world is chaotic,” she said, “and we all must find a way to create an order that makes sense to us.” Her abstract expressionist style captures an intense emotional response. Paul Chidester began his series during an extended stay in Umbria. In his paintings an indistinct Mediterranean light/space brings alive a variety of landscape and architectural novelties.

The Lace Mill Gallery is located at 165 Cornell St. in Kingston. Gallery hours are Saturday and Sunday from 1-4 p.m. The exhibit will be showing until Jan. 26.