

Artists — international and local — explore 'Them, Us & You'

Published in *The Times Argus*, March 10, 2016

By Mary Gow



Stefan Hard / Staff Photo Life-sized portraits of immigrants can be viewed normally, or through wire fencing in "Fence" a mixed media display by Burlington artist Bren Alvarez on an upper floor of SPA in the "Them, Us & You" show.

In this election year marked by racially charged and xenophobic rhetoric, a new exhibition at Barre's Studio Place Arts is especially apt.

"Them, Us & You," a global show with artists from around Vermont, the United States, and from nine other countries, opens this week at SPA. Installations, paintings, drawings, videos, photographs, mixed media pieces and textile art examine the "them-us" paradigm. The extensive and varied body of work in the show fills SPA — all three galleries are used for this exhibition.

This is a powerful theme and the artwork addresses a staggering range of "them-us" relationships — Including race, religion, gender, nationality, socio-economic status and bullying.

"This is a topic that we knew would be fascinating and rich," said Sue Higby, executive director of SPA. With the depth and variety of the artwork, she explained, "You would have a different experience every time you saw it based on whatever is in your life at the time. I hope people will come a couple of times to really absorb it."

Artwork in SPA's Main Floor Gallery includes several compelling installations.

"One Step Ahead of the Public," by Boris Beja of Zagorje ob Savi, Slovenia, includes seven framed photograph collages, each with a raised "veil" of translucent paper. The collages are accompanied by cleaning tools — a mop, a wash bucket and a vacuum cleaner stand on the gallery floor.

Each of Beja's photographs was taken inside an art museum or gallery, and in each one, the artwork has been excised, the space filled with neat handwritten narrative with detailed description of the place and art. The people in the photographs are the cleaners, lighting technicians, repairmen — the "behind the scenes" and almost invisible workers without whom the art could not have its venue.

Dana Walrath, of Underhill, addresses the inhumanity of genocide in her installation, "View from the High Ground." The installation comprises a long table with nine individual books mounted on stone tablets, one for each of nine genocides. Palimpsest-like, each one reuses pages of a historic zoology text. In each volume, through a series of drawings, victims of each genocide evolve to dehumanized animal and insect forms. The table sits on iron furnace parts.

The three drawings in "Millennial Childhood" series by Assunta Abdel Azim Mohamed from Vienna, Austria, feature children. Late elementary or middle school age, they crowd together. On examination, there's a cruel dynamic in the interaction of these ordinary looking kids as bullies torment victims. In Mohamed's drawings, there are no innocent bystanders.

"Fault Lines," an oil painting by Ann Young, of Barton, considers religious frictions. "Birds in Black and White," by Jane Pincus, of Roxbury, was inspired by and was a gift to a longtime close friend.

On the second floor, viewers are greeted by a pair of surveillance cameras, seemingly scanning the space and following movement. A poster by Jennifer Weigel of Somerville, Massachusetts, hangs near them. Weigel's poster features photographs of surveillance cameras with the message, "We're watching you. Don't try anything."

Robyn Renee Hasty traveled around the country photographing people living off the grid, including in blighted cities and deteriorated communities. The tintype images in her "Homeland Series" have a vintage quality as they explore the growing social movement of rejecting mainstream life for self-sustainability.

Matt Lee, of Bangalore, India, uses images from Indian matchbox labels in a setting on a beach in England in his "Sandown" series of digital prints. Alligators, birds, scissors, guns and other animals and objects encounter each other on the beach.

Three videos — from artists in China, Switzerland and England — are screened in the Second Floor Gallery.

Artwork in SPA's Third Floor Gallery connects to the theme of immigration.

A mixed media installation by Burlington artist Bren Alvarez, "snapshot," includes full-length black-and-white photograph portraits of six immigrants whose journeys to Vermont included crossing hostile political borders. The portraits hang on opposite sides of the gallery facing each other. Sections of fence hang from the ceiling. A book, "snapshot," includes reflections by these new Vermonters.

Two sets of small oil paintings by Nayda Cuevas, of Arlington, Massachusetts, address other aspects of the "us and them" of immigration. The tiny canvases recall photos and selfies taken with smart phones. One set, "Dreamers," features faces of young people who may be able to gain residency permits under the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The other set, "Murieta Protest" recalls ugly antiimmigrant protests in Murieta, California, in 2014.

Special events Saturday, March 26, include: art project led by SPA artists (all ages) 10 to 11:30 a.m.; "Walk & Talk" with the exhibit curators, Janet Van Fleet and Sue Higby, 1:30 to 2:30 p.m.; talk by anthropologist, artist and writer, Dana Walrath, Ph.D., MFA, "From Slavery to Syria: Art and Social Justice," 4 p.m. Events are free of charge; call to reserve your space in the art project by March 25.

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents "Them, Us & You," through April 16, at 201 N. Main St. in Barre. Hours are: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 4 p.m. Saturday; call 802-479-7069, or go online www.studioplacearts.com An artists' reception will be held 4 to 6 p.m. Saturday, March 12.