

Take a Trip to SPA by Jerry Carter

Hidden behind the traditional veneer of the brick and mortar of Studio Place Arts (SPA), off of North Main Street in Barre, is a place of unabashed expression. Boasting one of Vermont's only freedom of expression policies, which guards against censorship, SPA has a commitment to creating and fostering an atmosphere that promotes experimentation.

For this summer Sue Higby, the executive director of SPA, and the gallery committee have created a lineup of exhibits that they hope will force artists out of their comfort zones into new mediums and new techniques. This past May, when I visited the main floor gallery, they were able to do this by limiting artists to two colors: black and white. The exhibit, titled plainly, "It's Black and White," was a stunning example of how putting limits on the use of color can really bring out what Higby call, "some of the elemental aspects of visual art."

It wasn't the first time that SPA had done an exhibit that was color-specific. Higby said, "It is kind of fun to have something that is color-specific, because it encourages figurative as well as abstract work, which works well together." She had hung the art so that new works brushed elbows with and complemented old vanguards such as a loaned copy of an op art piece by John Douglas done in the late 1950s with a new op art piece by Michael Heffernan. (Op art is short for "optical art," a mid-twentieth-century movement where pattern and color create optical illusions.) Douglas's classic was created using a Rapidograph pen that combines alternating boxes of black and white in order to give the piece alternating depths from different perspectives. This now-popular technique was given a unique spin by Heffernan.

Heffernan has been "painting portraits of food that represent important art history moments," according to Higby and "he looked down at his plate one day when he ordered a cinnamon roll and he realized that this was actually an op art composition, so he painted it." Creative works like this populated the entire space, often pushing the boundaries of their medium, such as a painting by Jason Mallery of Orange that was hung on a nearby wall that leapt off of the canvas onto the frame. These works were only a few of the works on display throughout the month of May by over thirty artists from all around Vermont.

Starting on Tuesday, June 10, SPA brings in three new shows. On the first floor they are showcasing the "MFA in Graphic Design Invitational" featuring works by Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA) students. Occupying the second floor is a unique exhibit called "The Drawing Game." This exhibit presents visitors with over 60 years of artistic creation from the talented Hecht Family. On the third floor is an exhibit featuring the work of Mark Lorah called "Anti-algorithmic."

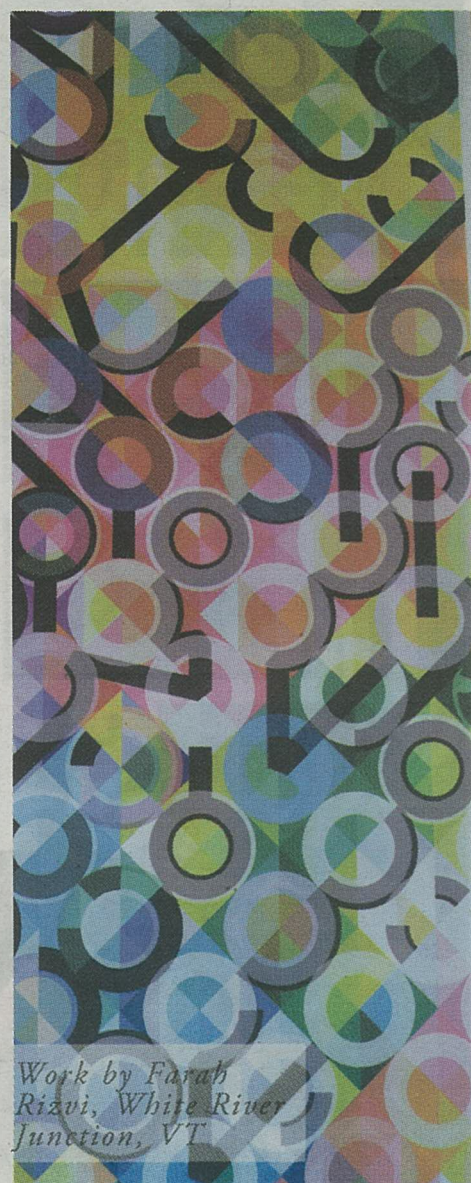
The first floor show highlights the works of thirteen VCFA graphic design master's students from the last two semesters. Jennifer Renko, the director of the graphic design program at VCFA, helped organize the show with Sue Higby as a way to demonstrate the fine art quality that a lot of graphic art possesses. When choosing works to share at the exhibit, Renko said that they were "looking for successful evidence of visual communication." The pieces were chosen on their ability to clearly communicate their message, their cohesion of concept and fine art look. This last part was important to Renko and Higby, because in an age when anyone can download accessible design software on the computer, it is sometimes forgotten that graphic design requires the same amount of skill and commit-

ment of other fine arts. On July 11, there will be an open reception for prospective VCFA students at the SPA exhibit.

The second floor exhibit, "The Drawing Game," will appeal to the aspiring graphic designer, the free-time doodler and the practiced artist. Hung throughout the space are 16 years worth of drawing game images. The drawing game, also known as "The Exquisite Corpse," is a party game played by the Surrealists in the 1920s, in which each participant begins with a piece of paper which they start a picture on. After a given amount of time, they must pass it on to another person who then has a chance to continue the picture. This continues until everyone has had a chance to contribute to each drawing. Other renditions of the game involve alternating between a person writing a sentence, then the next person illustrating the sentence, and so on, until everyone has contributed. As a pictorial rendition of the game "telephone," this fun game for the whole family often produces wacky and creative works that would not have been possible if they had been the single work of one person.

"Anti-algorithmic" on the third floor, by Mark Lorah, continues to bring visitors further away, from the often grounded elements of graphic design that greet them on the first floor, to the abstract. "His multi-media exhibit explores the relationship between organized structure and the need for irrational action," said Higby.

Whether it is this exhibit or future ones, visitors can be assured that they are one of a kind. About curating and organizing the various shows, Higby said, "Putting together a group show that hangs well is challenging. Everything that we do is an original show. These are works that will never be linking arms again. They are here and then they are gone." In order to get a glimpse of one of these shows, head on down to SPA in downtown Barre before it is gone.



Work by Farah Rizvi, White River Junction, VT