Visual Art Review

‘You’re Absolutely Spineless’: No backbone for 27 of region’s artists

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent
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Gabriel Tempesta: “Monarch”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Octopi and butterflies, worms and amoebae and jellyfish, a copepod and a cephalopod — there are plenty of creatures from land and water to see in the Main Floor Gallery at Studio Place Arts in Barre this month. But there is not a backbone among them.

“You’re Absolutely Spineless,” a group exhibition with artwork by 27 artists, celebrates invertebrates and their vast role in biodiversity. From exacting portraits to expressive abstractions, these artists consider some members of this vast category of creatures in 2D, sculpture and installations in a variety of media. Per recent flooding, call SPA or go to the website to make certain the gallery is open.

Piper Strong: “Octopus with Shell”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

From microscopic amoebae to meters-long giant squid, invertebrates — animals without backbones — are a diverse lot. Insects, spiders, snails, mollusks, worms, crustaceans are among them. Invertebrates are estimated to be 97% of all species. Without them, there wouldn’t be much life on Earth.

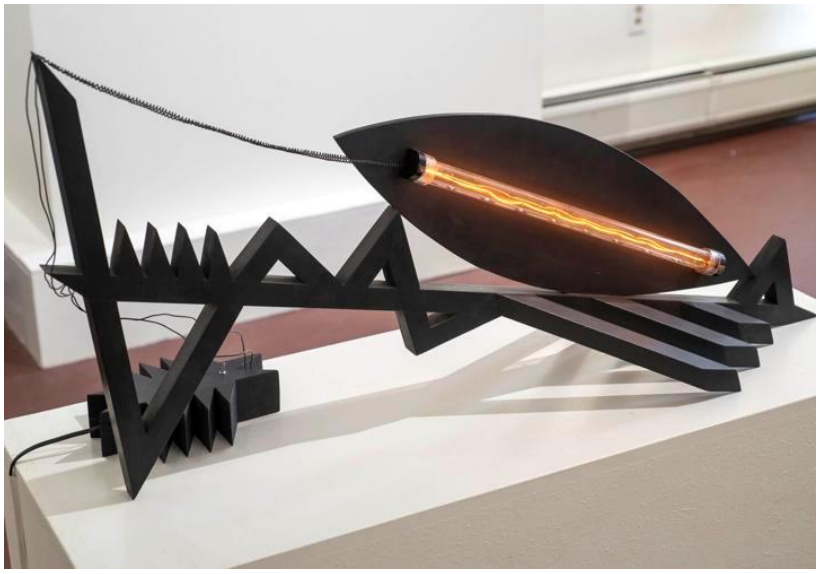
“In day-to-day life, we don’t necessarily think about the invertebrates, which really occupy the majority of space on our Earth. And some of the invertebrates are so teeny tiny, we don’t think about them at all,” said Sue Higby, SPA’s executive director.

“It’s always exciting to have a chance to share an idea that gives artists something to explore in a creative way and that also gives our audience a chance to think perhaps more broadly or deeply about a topic that affects us all,” she said.

Charismatic megafauna — large animals with wide appeal such as polar bears, elephants, big cats — often get the spotlight when considering threatened species and

environmental degradation. A few minutes with these artists' invertebrates provide a refreshing reminder of often overlooked creatures who are also essential in the balance and resilience of ecosystems.

SPA's summer exhibition themes always have an eye to young viewers on school vacation as well as adults. "You're Absolutely Spineless" is another terrific choice, offering the familiar and the fantastic — colorful partying worms, microscopic views expanded to human scale, denizens of the briny depths.



Christopher Sproat: "145 Sectavore", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Two mixed fiber pieces, "No Apologies" of a cockroach with attitude and "Hold the Salt," an appealing celery green slug, by Leslie Roth, of Montpelier, invite a different view of two non-charismatic creatures. Roth brings character and sensitivity to both.

Roth's cockroach stands proud — chin up and antennae out in his little knitted body and pointy feet. In her artist's statement she notes that research changed her perspective. The tenacious cockroach has been around for hundreds of millions of years and today has over 4,000 species. Although Roth has newfound appreciation for them, she still does not welcome them in her home.

Gabriel Tempesta, of Wolcott, takes viewers close, really close, to a monarch butterfly. Tempesta expands the palm sized Lepidoptera to several feet across and high, portraying it with meticulous detail across five attached panels. Monochromatic in charcoal and watercolor, he captures details from the tiny wing scales to its curled straw-like proboscis. His "Monarch" is not simply a specimen, it's an alert alive creature, whom we see as though we were in its realm.

Naturalist Susan Sawyer, of South Woodbury, considers a trio of tiny creatures netted in lower King Pond — “A Daphniid,” a tiny mostly transparent water flea; “A Calanoid Copepod,” a teeny organism with spectacular antennae; and “Waterlily Leaf Beetle,” a leggy and jumpy little sprite who particularly likes floating leaf plants.

Sawyer uses a silverpoint process for the trio. With a very thin silver wire held in a stylus makes marks on a prepared ground. Over time, the silver tarnishes to a warm brown.

Adelaide Murphy Tyrol, of Plainfield, takes us underwater with a wonderfully acrobatic octopus, tentacles stretching and swirling, in “Zone of Influence,” in acrylic and silver leaf on canvas. Her “Kraken,” a deep sea dwelling giant squid in the SPA front window, propels itself through the water — its shiny black eye perhaps taking in the view of the floodwaters outdoors.

Adelaide Murphy Tyrol: “Zone of Influence”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Bruce Hasso, of Charlotte, “Acer saccharum Medusozoa,” a jellyfish in sugar maple, floats through its glass case. Look closely, it balances on a single tentacle.

“Totems Walking Sticks and Spirit Sticks: Karmimadeebora McMillan” fills SPA’s Third Floor Gallery with brilliant color. The works are paintings on long narrow wood boards

— some barely 3 inches wide and nearly 4 feet long. McMillan, who lives in New York, has deep family ties in the Barre area.

The explosion of color and visual syncopation of the arrangement of vertical and horizontal boards, infuse the gallery with energy.

Karmimadeebora McMillan: “Small Geometry 1,2,3”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

“From a historical context, these items come from a place of spirituality, tradition and folklore,” explains McMillan in her artist’s statement.

“Spirit Sticks are a marking of time: My time contemplating color, patterns, symbols and my place in history,” she says.

McMillan usually creates these sculptures as she embarks on a new body of work — exploring ideas that may then be in larger format paintings. The totems, walking sticks and spirit sticks then begin to stand on their own.

Patterns and colors extend over seven boards in “Vermont Landscape.” McMillan draws viewers into a fantasy landscape in “Once Upon a Time.” Her “Flower Study pieces burst with blooms.

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