

‘Strength’: New SPA show examines power and potency

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Stefan Hard / Staff Photo

Theftord Center artist Carolyn Enz Hack's floor mounted "Firmament" in plexi mirrors, wire and mica.

Inner strength often connotes wisdom, something that is lasting; yet outer strength implies a quality that is more temporary, a trait often reserved for youthful contemporaries. During earlier times, we knew to keep our noses to the grindstones and understood the New England ethic that we must work hard before deriving self-fulfillment. These actions would make us stronger.

“It seems like in recent years, there has been growing interest in Strongman and Ninja Warrior competitions and a glut of superhero-type films,” noted Studio Place Arts Executive Director Sue Higby. “I wonder if this implies that we long for simpler expressions of force or strength in the face of epic world problems.”

Several years ago, community members rallied around the slogan “Vermont Strong!” as if in defiance of Mother Nature’s cruel reach to fragile mountain villages around our state. After Tropical Storm Irene forced floodwaters upon the region, artist Matt Larson from Waterbury took some solace by documenting the innate strategy for survival found in native trees. One of the images in the exhibit by Larson, “Persistence,” depicts three commanding columns of dead trees, their tops broken off and sides riddled with holes where birds had foraged for sustenance.

Sometimes strength is fleeting. Artist Cecelia Kane from Peacham is exhibiting “Day 71” in a series of photo-selfies taken over 89 consecutive days after staring into her bathroom mirror, when she posed the question: “How am I feeling today?” After two months, she boldly declared that she was “feeling strong.” Her photograph of that split second, along with a portrait sketch

and a beaded self-portrait on a vintage family handkerchief completed soon after, externalize her rarified moment of brawn.

In Barre, strong arms shape one of the world's strongest stones. This upper-torso power is depicted in a painting, "The Necessary Strength," by Heidi Broner, of Montpelier, of a T-shirt-and safety vest-attired worker. Similarly, the oversized hands of a small steel figure by Torin Porter, of Glover, called "Tree Balancer," send the signal that, though lanky, this man is capable of magnificent feats of strength. While cloaked in a classic A-line frock, the female depicted in a painting by Janet Van Fleet, of Cabot, "Red Dress," possesses a backbone that resembles a small mountain range.

Raw resilience emerges from several artworks in the show. At the rear of the gallery, a nearly 5-foot tall canvas named "Ascent from the Chasm of My Own Despair," by Ann Young, of Barton, depicts a figure clawing its way out of a vortex-like hole. Similarly, three people sit resolutely on the stoop of a damaged home in the ruins of a formerly prosperous city on the smaller canvas, "Notre Dame de la Guerre, Homefront, Belgium, WWI," by Robert Towne, of South Hero.

An oversized, 9-foot figure sprawls on the floor of the gallery, made from fist-sized shards of plexi-mirror and sheets of mica suspended from wire pegs. Viewers looking into the reflective pieces of "Firmament" by Carolyn Enz Hack, of Thetford, will see tiny, multiple fragments of themselves that, once combined, serve to inspire larger-than-life power.

Upstairs on the second floor at SPA, visitors may view a collection of ink and marker drawings by teacher, writer and folklorist Eleanor Kokor Ott, of Calais. According to Ott, her 18 works on display are "Spirit Beings" that "come from a place I know not where, and people, or rather, spirit the page. For this reason, I consider these drawings spirit images."

Ruth Hamilton, of Poultney, is exhibiting a group of paintings and a site installation of paper and found object beings in "Nature Scapes and Other Worlds," in the third floor gallery. Her paintings use rich colors to recall a walk in the deep forest or open pastures with ancient apple trees; floating from the ceiling is a vast flock of small black birds, gathering as if on a high hilltop to migrate southward for the season.

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents "Strength," July 21-Aug. 29, at SPA, 201 N. Main St. in Barre. Also on exhibit are "Spirit Images by Eleanor Ott" (Second Floor Gallery), "Nature Scapes and Other Worlds by Ruth Hamilton" (Third Floor Gallery). Hours are: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 4 p.m. Saturday; for information, call 802-479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com. A public artists' reception will be held 6 to 8 p.m. today.