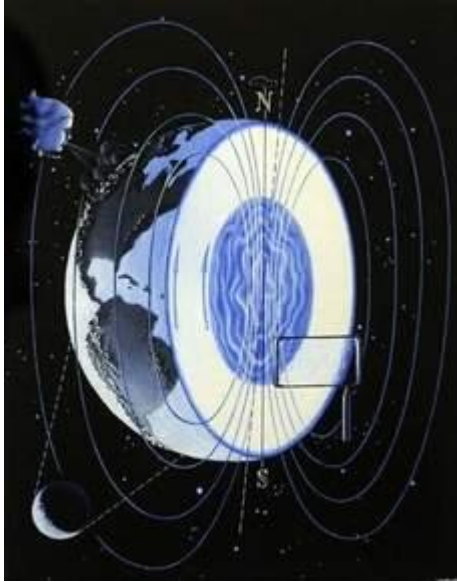


Rebecca Merrilees: Four-day retrospective honors Northfield artist

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By Mary Gow



“Look at the face. With the glasses on his forehead, he is very peaceful and sleeping,” said curator Mark Waskow, pointing to a graphite on paper portrait hanging at Studio Place Arts in Barre.

The exquisite little portrait was drawn by Rebecca Boyer Merrilees in 1938, when she was 16 years old. Her subject was her father, artist Ralph Boyer.

Not far from this drawing hangs a luminous watercolor, “Our Pond — No Place Like Home,” with a half-submerged frog in a quiet moment, light reflecting from the surface and cluster of foam, and pond pebbles visible through the water. Merrilees painted this scene in 2010.

Merrilees was drawing and painting before the little 1938 portrait, and has continued since the 2010 watercolor. Between them she had an extraordinarily rich creative career. From countless illustrations for print publications — in 1961 she became the first woman ever to illustrate a cover of *Readers Digest* — to award-winning still lifes, landscapes, botanical works, figure studies, and even to the occasional surrealist piece, her work has covered an astonishing range of subjects in a variety of media.

For the next four days, through Sunday, in its main floor gallery, Studio Place Arts is presenting a major retrospective of Merrilees’ creative career. This fleeting show was fitted into SPA’s full curatorial schedule on short notice because much of Merrilees’ work is soon to be dispersed to museums, historical societies, and other organizations. With 45 pieces on display, this exhibit includes paintings from every decade of her career.

“This is literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see the works of a master painter who also has local roots,” said Waskow, art collector and curator of the SPA exhibit. “This is a unique opportunity to see a 75-year retrospective of someone who really knows how to work with the media that they are using.” He added that for those who come to the SPA reception on Friday, “there is a very good chance that they will meet her.”

For Merrilees, born in 1922, artistic nature and nurture were evident early on. Her father, Ralph L Boyer, was a celebrated artist, a member of the Westport School of Art, and a Works Progress Administration (WPA) muralist. Her mother, Rebecca H. Boyer, was also a painter. Merrilees’ formal art education included studies at the American School of Design, Pratt Institute, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

Merrilees and her late husband, Douglas Merrilees, made Northfield their home. An innovative designer and architect, Douglas was a pioneer in the manufacture of modular furniture and was instrumental in the “Made in Vermont” movement. Through Rebecca Merrilees’ long career, painting, drawing, illustrating books — “Trees of North America” among them — she has been also a generous supporter of community organizations, providing illustrations for the library, historical society, and Norwich University among many others.

“At 90 years of age and now residing at Mayo Healthcare in Northfield, Rebecca remains dedicated to making art and teaching others about art,” explained Sue Higby, SPA executive director.

Seven small pieces from the mid-1940s, all gouache on paper, hang at the entrance to SPA. Several of these were among her portfolio pieces during her studies. A string of pearls drapes over a velvety red glacier, jagged Alpine peaks rise in the background, in the surrealist “Pearly Glacier.” In a trompe l’oeil from 1948 titled “Cotton,” a puffy cotton boll and gleaming spool of green thread are accompanied by a swatch of calico that is so precise it looks like it was appliquéd to the composition.

Landscapes from Maine with verdant forests and streams, a lithograph of a much loved doll, and a gouache of seashells are among Merrilees’ works exhibited from the 1950s and 1960s.

“It’s really hard to do rocks, it’s really hard to do glass and it’s really hard to do eggs — those are three things that are notoriously difficult to paint in any kind of credible way. Don’t ask me why, but they are very difficult and she did them all,” said Waskow, explaining that starting in the 1970s Merrilees often painted rocks and eggs.

“This is a great piece,” he said gesturing to a charcoal and pastel still life with eggs and egg shells. The shapes, set in a bowl and reflected by a glass surface, almost seem to float.

“She always had a bent toward nature,” said Waskow, of subjects evident through all decades of her work. The 1990s include drawings of poplar leaves, wild raspberries and others, with her extraordinary botanical detail. This decade also includes landscapes — Vermont, a brilliant Cathedral Rock, Sedona, Ariz., and bold watercolors from Guadalajara and Uruapan, Mexico.

“To capture this both real and reflected image is really wonderful,” said Waskow about Merrilees’ 2007 “Low Tide/Reflecting,” a watercolor of a group of four people walking in shallow water along a beach.

“Everything — from the footprints to the light and the reflections — you can see the water coming in and going out. Anyone who has been on a beach can stand here and project themselves into this piece and feel what’s going on.”

“This is a really wonderful show,” said Waskow. “We at SPA are very very pleased and honored that SPA is the site for this retrospective.”

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents “A Lifetime Retrospective Exhibit: Works by Rebecca Merrilees,” today through Sunday, at SPA, 201 N. Main St. in Barre. Special hours are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. today; 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday; and noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday; call 479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com. A public reception will be held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Friday, Sept. 14.