

## **‘Rock Solid for 15 Years’: SPA celebrates its neighborhood**

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*Stefan Hard / Staff Photo*

*Barre sculptor Gampo Wickenheiser's "Vision Serpent" in Portuguese marble, 2015.*

A giant ant in black marble lies on its back, feet upturned. A delicate pear sculpted from a brick sits below a bonsai-like tree sculpted from Barre gray granite. Nearby, a Mayan-inspired visage framed by a serpent's jaws gazes ahead. And that's just the beginning.

“Rock Solid for 15 Years” opens today at Studio Place Arts, continuing SPA’s decade-and-a-half tradition of presenting an extraordinary annual exhibition showcasing stone sculpture and assemblages by area artists. This year, the show features work by 21 artists. Along with its impressive range of three-dimensional work in a variety of stone, the show includes rock related paintings and prints. A public reception will be held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. today.

“Rock Solid” also extends around town with the Art Stroll. A map and descriptions guide viewers to eight outdoor stone sculptures spanning 115 years — from 1899’s “Robert Burns” to a trio of 2014 works, “Coffee Break,” “Unzipping the Earth” and “Colonel Isaac Barré.” All are within easy walking distance of SPA.

Inside SPA, “Rock Solid is accompanied by two solo shows: “Tarpentry,” with photographs by Linda Bryan and “Pattern & Signal” with paintings and ceramic sculptures by Alex Costantino.

From SPA’s earliest days – the community arts center opened in 2000 – the organization has valued and celebrated the unique creative culture of its home

“We made a promise at that time to honor the artists who are in our neighborhood with an annual stone sculpture show,” said Sue Higby, SPA’s executive director.

“Many know about the high quality stone in our region. Our goal with this show is to attract much greater attention on the people — in particular the artists — who have the ingenuity to make beautiful things from stone,” said Higby.

Every year, the show gives viewers opportunity to see outstanding and diverse work. This show also provides welcome opportunity to artists who work in the stone industry.

“The show is an opportunity to showcase your personal work, not your work for commission, said Gampo Wickenheiser of Barre. “It is a source of motivation to put some time aside to focus on your personal artistic endeavors — to delve into your own creativity, to make what speaks to you.”

Wickenheiser has been in almost every “Rock Solid” show since 2001. One of his first marble sculptures was in that show and it launched him on his career path.

Wickenheiser’s “Vision Serpent,” was inspired by his interest in indigenous and ancient cultures. Recently, he was drawn to Mayan culture — the imagery of hieroglyphs carved in stone, and Mayan ritual and mythology. The Mayan “Vision Serpent” bloodletting ritual was a vehicle for communicating with the afterlife or spirit world.

In Portuguese black marble crossed with thin white veins, Wickenheiser’s “Vision Serpent” brings together the earthly and spiritual realms. The snake rises up, its gaping mouth wide open. Inside it, between curved fangs, a timeless, serene face looks out.

Heather Ritchie of Plainfield has had pieces in “Rock Solid” every year. After graduating from Bennington College with a major in painting and sculpture she had started her granite carving apprenticeship in 1999.

“I love this show. It’s a wonderful opportunity to show work that’s not industry based,” Ritchie said.

“A lot of what we do is very solitary. You don’t spend a lot of time with other people. It’s wonderful to see what our peers bring and to see what other people from around the state who work in other stone bring,” she said.

Ritchie has four pieces in the show. Her two sets of breast bookends and a small heart sculpture are themes she has been exploring. Her abstract piece “Harvest” is a departure. Proceeds from its sale will go to Susan B. Komen Breast Cancer Research.

“Harvest” had an unusual genesis. A sculptor from southern Vermont had some marble cut in Barre and offered Ritchie the scraps.

“It was primo quality. I was looking at the palette and one piece just knocked me over,” she

recalled. "I saw what I wanted to make. It is so rare when you look at a piece of stone and it tells you what it wants to be."

"This is a powerful piece for me. The concept is about breast cancer," said Ritchie. "We all know someone who has been affected by this disease."

A luminous piece of marble, "Harvest" is in part sensually smooth. It is also scarred with drill marks and edges.

"You almost have to read it by what's not there," explained Ritchie. "My intention is to show a symbol of strength and beauty and the power of transcendence. The title can work both ways. If you have been touched by breast cancer, you will know what it means, but for others it may be the stone harvested from the earth."

***Studio Place Arts***

*Studio Place Arts presents "Rock Solid for 15 Years," up through Oct. 30, at SPA, 201 N. Main St. in Barre. Also on exhibit are "Tarpentry," visual narrative by Linda Bryan (second floor gallery); and "Pattern & Signal," paintings and ceramic sculptured by Alex Constantino (third floor gallery). Hours are: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 4 p.m. Saturday; call 802-479-7069, or go online to [www.studioplacearts.com](http://www.studioplacearts.com). A public reception will be held 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. today.*