

Published in *The Times Argus*
September 19, 2013
by Mary Gow

‘Rock Solid’: The personal side of Barre’s granite world



Photo by Stefan Hard

Sudbury artist Paul Mar Hilliard’s “HOBble” of steel and marble is in the foreground at SPA’s annual Stone Show. In the middle left is Montpelier artist Ryan Mays’ “Who Cooks for You, Baby?” in sandstone. Right is Danville artist Nancy N. Dietenbach’s “Beginnings” in Swanton marble and glass; and on the wall is the “Ghost Mesa” series of Newark artist Claire Van Vliet done as litho on magnolia paper.

A gray granite gargoyle, long fingers resting on its folded arms, hunches inside Studio Place Arts. Nearby, set inside a wooden square inside a square, the loops of a lover’s knot connect endlessly in marble. Across the room, a Native American gazes from a granite stalk of corn.

Beginning this week, Studio Place Arts presents “Rock Solid: 13th Annual Stone Show,” a celebration of the artistry and skill of Vermont’s stone sculptors and carvers. Now a tradition, the “Rock Solid” show is firmly rooted in the tradition of stone carving that runs so deep in Barre.

This year “Rock Solid” again brings together an extraordinary range of works. More than 20 artists are featured; most live in central Vermont. “Rock Solid” is accompanied by three more exhibits on SPA’s upper floors: “I Am You,” drawings and prints by Meri Stiles; “The Bumblebee Series” by Gabriel Tempesta; and “Botanical Watercolors” by Susan Bull Riley.

The “Rock Solid” show, which started soon after SPA first opened its door in 2000, “was based on the idea that we need to stand behind the local artisans and provide a professional viewing space so that the larger public could come in and enjoy what they do,” said Sue Higby, SPA’s

executive director.

For many whose professional work involves monumental commissions, this exhibition provides an opportunity to show different work, sometimes riskier pieces of social commentary or experimentation with mixing media.

“This is when most of the carvers in town here, carvers who are doing traditional work day in and day out, have a chance to make and display something that’s really fun and meaningful to them,” said Chris Miller, of Calais, who has had pieces in many of SPA’s “Rock Solid” shows.

Two of Miller’s current pieces are here. “Gargoyle” — the hunched figure greeting visitors to SPA — in his. The amiable looking “Sleeping Bear” in pink granite, a sculpture that invites petting, is also Miller’s.

Giuliano Cecchinelli Sr., one of Barre’s luminaries, has two pieces in the show. In “Mother Earth Bleeding,” a graceful, anatomic length of forked pine joins a base of sculpted black granite in a poignant connection. In “Shafted Since 1620,” a Native American emerges from a shaft of corn.

In “Beginnings,” by Nancy Diefenbach of Danville, a glass ball is held, perhaps as though being nurtured, by a smooth organic-looking form of red Swanton marble.

“By combining abstraction with figurative carving, I often express in gesture a human experience, a personal relationship, or my reaction to the natural world,” explains Diefenbach. “It is fascinating to me the way the stone responds to the chisels, the way the tools can create texture and contrasts, and the way marble can take on a life of its own.”

Paul Calter, of Randolph Center, whose distinguished books on mathematics include “Squaring the Circle: Geometry and Architecture,” brings together the timeless connection between geometry and art in “Mandala III: Lovers’ Knot.” The marble knot design, he explains, comes from one in a church in Scotland. Framed by a red square of the same area as the circle — one of those timeless geometric puzzles. The square is in turn framed by another square in another classical relationship. The whole — knot, circle, squares — form a mandala.

“Rock Solid” is not all sculpture; stone is also there in two dimensions.

Artist, illustrator, typographer Claire Van Vliet, of Newark, founder of Janus Press, and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellow (yes, that’s the so-called “genius grant”), has four pieces in the exhibition including three in her “Ghost Mesa” series. Each of these powerful lithographs looks at the same magnificent landform but each in a different way and with different materials.

Upstairs at SPA, there’s also a lot to see and think about.

“I Am You,” on SPA’s second floor, is Meri Stiles’ first show. Her drawings — some with anthropological, mathematical, and scientific references, some a little wacky — really invite the viewer to spend time with them. Many are rich in intriguing details: tiny Mayan-style glyphs, floating planets, a red coffee cup, a blue foot. Some are witty, like “Godzilla Picks Out

Wallpaper (Mom).”

On the third floor are Susan Bull Riley’s “Botanical Watercolors” and Gabriel Tempesta’s “Bumblebee Series.” From a ginseng in a classic botanical style to plants (including ginseng) in the wild, Riley takes viewers into nature.

Tempesta of Wolcott also looks at nature — endangered bumblebees. In large varnished charcoal drawings, he brings viewers into the microcosm of these threatened pollinators’ world.

On Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents “Rock Solid,” through Nov. the 2nd, 13th annual Stone Show; “I Am You,” drawings, mono-prints and block prints by Meri Stiles (second floor); “The Bumblebee Series” by Gabriel Tempesta, and “Botanical Watercolors” by Susan Bull Riley (third floor), at SPA, 201 N. Main St. in Barre. Hours are: 10 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. A public reception will be held Friday, Sept. 20, 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.