SPA art social brings community, culture together

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Artist Mackenzie Kovaka pictured in front of works in her exhibition “Is That a Table Saw?”
Photo by Andrei Aprea

BARRE - Studio Place Arts has transformed the idea of opening receptions into social events that connect community members directly with the artists and their work.

The SPA Art Social, held on Sept. 19, exhibited three new shows: “Is That a Table Saw?”, “Incidental Objects,” and “At the Car Wash.” The gallery also brought back the annual show “Rock Solid,” a celebration of the city’s historic granite trade.

“It gives the artists a chance to describe what they’ve been working on,” said Sue Higby, executive director of SPA. “And it gives people who maybe don’t have a chance to have art influence their life in a meaningful way to actually ask questions.”

A trio of musicians from the Vermont Fiddle Orchestra accompanied the social, with composer and assistant director Susan Reid on violin. The lively and warm sound moved through the building, pouring into the “Rock Solid” show in the Main Gallery.

Higby said she chose the fiddle orchestra because of the upbeat mood the instruments create. “People are very responsive to these combinations of music,” Higby said. “It relaxes people so that they can maybe see the artwork in a different way.”

One of the new exhibits, “Incidental Objects” by Mark Lorah, was a collection of found materials that are often overlooked. According to SPA, the items “explore our physical connection with the ordinary.”

“Rock Solid” has been shown for 26 years, since the studio’s opening. This year, SPA highlighted the work of the late John A. Matusz, a Waitsfield artist who had his work in the gallery for 14 years.

“This is an annual show that represents some of what Barre is known for,” said Maggie Neale, a founding member of Studio Place Arts and an artist who works with a variety of mediums.

Barre’s history as the “Granite Capital of the World” persists through the exhibition of these sculptures and the use of Barre granite.

Neale described the Art Social as “a way of communication on many levels.” Visitors were able to meet the artists in their studio rather than solely viewing their work in a gallery setting, she said, creating “a more personal experience.”

Mackenzie Kovaka’s studio is along the Second Floor Gallery, lined with watercolor paintings of woodworking tools for her first exhibition, “Is That a Table Saw?” The

pieces were created as part of Kovaka's residency at SPA, which gave her a year to focus on this project.

"Sometimes art can feel really separate. I think that Studio Place Arts does a great job of making sure that art is part of a community," Kovaka said.

Kovaka said she appreciates that SPA allowed her to highlight tools, calling them an "odd topic" for an exhibition. She said representing woodworkers' line of work artistically could broaden the gallery's appeal.

Around the corner, artist Rosalind Daniels spoke with guests in the Quick Change Gallery, a booth that displays her photograph exhibition "At the Car Wash." Taken from inside vehicles, the pictures depict how car washes create a distorted view of the machines and the driver's surroundings. Daniels said she is always searching for abstract shapes and used only her phone and Photoshop to create her exhibition.

"As an artist, you work by yourself in a room. To have people come and talk to you about it is really a reward that we don't get very often as artists," Daniels said.

Artist Rosalind Daniels pictured in front of her exhibition, "At the Car Wash," in the Quick Change Gallery
Photo by Andrei Aprea

At 5 p.m., visitors gathered in front of SPA to view “Dance a Sculpture,” a performance from the Sonia Plumb Dance Company, which was choreographed by Plumb herself and performed by Harold Quayle, a student from Randolph.

Higby said she’d been planning to collaborate with Plumb for a number of years, and having Matusz’s sculptures for “Rock Solid” in the front plaza set the plans in stone.

During the introduction, Plumb said the piece was inspired both by monuments in Hope Cemetery and the works of Matusz and Chris Miller, another area sculptor.

The dancing commenced with Quayle’s movements mimicking the shapes of the sculptures in front of SPA. At the end of the performance, Quayle and Plumb invited spectators to dance and demonstrated how to embody the sculptures.

“People saw the sculptures with fresh eyes,” Higby said. “It was energetic. It was poetic in many ways.”

The exhibitions will be up through Oct. 24 at Studio Place Arts.

Via Community News Service, a University of Vermont internship, for the Times Argus.