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Artists take different paths to the ‘American Dream’

By Mary Gow



Stefan Hard / Staff Photo

Works in acrylic, canvas, and cardboard by Underhill artist W. David Powell.

Two paintings of cardboard boxes, each one an 18-inch cube with the four pieces of its lid splayed open, hang on adjacent walls in a corner of the Main Floor Gallery at Studio Place Arts.

On one box, in a bright blue band, is the word “Happiness”; on the other in a bright red band is “Security.” Standing on a pedestal between them, in the flesh — or corrugation — a third box sits, also an 18-inch cube, with “More” spelled out on its lemon yellow band.

W. David Powell’s trio of works is among many thought provoking pieces in the new exhibition at Studio Place Arts, “American Dream.” This show, accompanied by Beth Robinson’s “The Aviary” on the second floor and “ART-Artifacts” on the third floor opens this week with a reception 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Friday. The shows continue to Aug. 31.

“The idea is to show work that explores the idea of the American dream in new ways,” said Sue Higby, SPA’s executive director. “Inadvertently, we may think of the American dream as something that belongs to our grandparents, that because we look at the idea with nostalgia, that nostalgia limits our idea of what the future offers.”

“This is not decorative work, this is social commentary; visitors should plan to spend time and explore the pieces and their reactions to them,” said Higby. “Thought provoking artwork can help the viewer reflect on why it has a strong impact.”

Looking at these pieces, she suggests, “Ask yourself how you conceive the American dream.”

It’s no surprise that this rich theme inspired a diverse range of works. In looking at them, it’s also worth considering their titles — some are straightforward, some tongue in cheek.

In Paul Marr Hilliard’s digital print, “Border Crossing,” the wide open mouth of Uncle Sam serves as the entrance to an amusement park. Like the minimum height signs at most rides, this one has a requirement too — match the skin tone to get in. The sign makes clear which color opens doors.

Hilliard, of Sudbury, has a second piece in the show — a digital print on a giant pill bottle — “American Dream Sleep Aid.”

“Capital Security” by John Douglas of Burlington, invites questions about our perceptions of security. A large scale photograph, it features the Vermont Statehouse. Douglas, nude, stands on its steps with a machine gun; bodies of casualties are piled behind him.

Robert J. Towne’s acrylic on canvas, “American Icons,” has a poignant quality. In the painting’s top half, the words “Cadillac Live the Dream” float in the sky above an iconic desert scene, complete with a shiny pink Cadillac, and a couple — he looks a bit like the Marlboro Man. In the lower portion of the piece, another man sits on a sidewalk beside trash bags and empty bottles, cup for donations in front of him, graffiti scrawled behind him.

W. David Powell, of Underhill, with the boxes “Security,” “Happiness” and “More” and another piece, “Freedom of Choice,” notes in his artist’s statement, “My work often deals with a longing, but not for the near or distant past the images I draw from represent, but for a time that never was — a promise that never materialized. “

Beth Robinson, the artist featured in the Second Floors Gallery, creates figures she calls “Strange Dolls.” She sculpts their heads, hands, and feet using polymer clay or air dry clays. She clothes them in vintage outfits she designs.

“Dolls represent precious things, sentimentality, innocence and I am attracted to manipulating people’s natural response to the doll form by pairing it with the grotesque,” Robinson explains.

The figures in “The Aviary” have heads of birds — turkeys, sandhill cranes and others — in skeletal looking white polymer with bright glass eyes. They are dressed in Victorian style gowns and suits. Many are also paired with vintage photographs, modified to their avian personas.

“ART-Artifact,” the exhibit in the third floor gallery, features pieces made with re-used objects — not recycled materials so much as objects that have been handled and used. The exhibit shows

a range of pieces that have interacted in human lives.

Gloves, for example, make three appearances. In Neiman's "Catch" by B. Amore of Castleton, a found glove is paired with street-made paper – a Neiman Marcus bag, returned almost to pulp, by city use and traffic. In Carver's "Gloves," also by Amore, cold cast bronze and stone, capture the details and hand shape and use of a stone carver's work gloves. "Ways to See" by Jude Bond of Burlington is a linen installation with ladies' gloves.

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents "American Dream," artists exploring the driving forces for the American Dream today, July 16-Aug. 31, 201 N. Main St. in Barre. Also on exhibit are "The Aviary" by Beth Robinson (Second Floor Gallery) and "ART-Artifact" (Third Floor Gallery), stories told via transformed shards and remnants. Hours are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, noon to 4 p.m.; call 802-479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com. A public reception will be held Friday, July 19, 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.