

# ‘That Cat’ at SPA: Artists reflect their passions, serious and silly

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Rob Millard-Mendez: “Bastet Barge”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Cats on counters, cats on chairs, cats on shoulders, cats on the prow — plump ones, lean ones, mischievous ones, haughty ones —cats have taken over the Main Gallery at Barre’s Studio Place Arts. True to their species, each and every one is a cat with character

A fête for the feline inclined, “That Cat” opened last week at SPA with paintings, sculpture, photographs, mixed media, art books, fiber arts and more. The exhibition features work by more than 30 artists.

With tabbies and tomcats, glam, gregarious, curious and comforting ones, and some who are just plain silly, “That Cat” is delightful for all ages, and especially welcoming to young viewers. Children find lots to see and stories to imagine about the subjects of these artworks.

Also at SPA, “Brushwork Barre” in the Third Floor Gallery, with paintings of places and structures around Barre by Tracey J. Hambleton, offers multi-faceted portrait of the city. “Letting Go: A Work in Progress” in the Second Floor Gallery, features paintings and mixed media artwork considering loss and grieving by Michelle Lesnak.

Lesnak and Hambleton are 2021-2022 SPA Studio Residency Recipients. The program provides artists use of private studio space at SPA for 11 months and the opportunity to focus on a body of new work. “Brushwork Barre” and “Letting Go” are exhibitions of this new work.

In SPA’s tiny Quick Change Gallery, Paul A. Calter’s “Mount Mansfield Sketchbook” with field sketches and paintings.



Michelle Lesnak: “Sister of Compassion”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo



Maggie Neale: “Cora’s Cat”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

For “That Cat,” SPA’s executive director Sue Higby reached out to artists for artwork of cats with personality.

“Cats who are a little bossy, a little flamboyant. That cat who’s always getting into trouble and is a little mischievous,” said Higby.

Artists responded, many passionately, and nearly 50 felines are in the clowder.

In the center of the gallery, visitors pass through a wonderful cat interaction. Tom Batey’s large-scale “Fire Cats,” tall and lean in painted wood with twitching tails and beguiling wire whiskers, sit elegantly alert. Across from them, a playful trio of Mary Jo Krolewski’s fluffy fiber art kitties — orange, green and lavender — tackle an oversized fiber box of Meow Mix.

Look behind them and see who is peeking out of the purple papier-mâché Hyde’s mouth, in Todd Logan’s “Hyde and Peep.”



Tom Batey: “Fire Cats”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo



Rob Towne: "Backyard Panther", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur /  
Staff photo

"The Great Sphinx of Montpelier" by Roger Weingarten slowly rotates, a fantastic creature composed of antique bits and pieces — iron fence finials, a 19th century German balance scale base, a lion-headed embosser from an Oddfellows Lodge, door knobs, plumbing parts and more.

Weingarten notes that the piece is dedicated to his late alpha cat, Belle Starr. "This piece is meant as an elegy to her fierce pre-pharaonic majesty."

Speaking of pharaohs, in Rob Millard Mendez's wood and aluminum "Bastet Barge," a black cat aboard a felucca evokes the Egyptian goddess. A ball of yellow yarn adorns the boat's bow and a trio of little yellow mice dangle from its stern.

The cover of Marcia Vogler's small art book, "Pet Stories," with little ears and nose, hints at what's inside — small paintings and words that capture a bit of the cats in her life.

"She never scratched anyone unless she was pushed too far. She guarded the food bowl like a sentry on the Berlin wall. She moved slowly, but she was the boss," Vogler writes about Girl Cat, who sits with alert aside her red bowl.

Relationships with cats, cats on missions, acrobatic cats, curious cats — all of those and more are at "That Cat," and, as Sigmund Freud supposedly remarked, "Time spent with cats is never wasted."

“Letting Go: A Work in Progress” grew from Lesnak’s plan for her first painting during her SPA residency, a painting prompted by her grieving the death of a beloved cat. Her attempts led to a journey exploring grief and loss and their expression in her work. Her paintings have a dreamlike quality, a quiet sense of longing in her figures and their gestures.

“Capturing the feelings and experience of loss is nuanced ... The thoughtful use of color, the mark making of paint to let the brushstrokes indicate a mood and the use of line to emphasize the small feature of an eyelash were all ways I discovered,” says Lesnak in her artist’s statement.



Tracey J. Hambleton: “Enter the Alleyway, Into the Light II”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff photo

Hambleton’s “Brushwork Barre” paintings — most painted outdoors around and near downtown Barre, a few looking out SPA’s windows — come together in a rich portrait of the city. Viewers will feel the seasons and time of day in Hambleton’s works, which capture juxtapositions of historic and new buildings, modern Barre and its roots, and moments in nature.

“Though sometimes gritty, weathered, imperfect or worn, the landscape of Barre keeps me inspired. Everywhere I wander I witness the intersection of culture, class and history. The shadows cast from church steeples, the color of brick, the foursquare roof lines, the evidence of changing times and the people who live and work here — these are the things I hope to preserve with my paintings.”