

Visual Art Review

‘Rock Solid XXIII’: SPA, artists transcend devastating flooding

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent

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Kerry O. Furlani: “No Escape”, photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

Polished curved faces of the two pieces of British Columbia jade fit snugly together in Christopher Curtis’s “We Two.” But the pieces can also be separated — viewers are invited to move them. In changing positions, the two pieces of stone engage in different and emotionally expressive relationships.

A seemingly broken chunk of Barre gray granite, a slender shard with jagged edges stands balanced on a rough granite base. Emerging from the stone in relief, a kiss

tenderly touches a woman's cheek. Look at the other side of Giuliano Cecchinelli's aptly named "Kiss" and see another view of this loving gesture.



Christopher Curtis: "We Two", photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

This week, in spite of the toll of floodwaters and storm damage, Studio Place Arts opened "Rock Solid XXIII," showcasing stone sculpture and assemblages by regional artists and other work that depicts the beauty of stone.

"Rock Solid" has been an annual autumn SPA tradition since 2000. This year, the exhibition features 21 artists mostly from Vermont. Three are from farther afield with strong Vermont ties, all of whom teach at the Carving Studio and Sculpture Center in West Rutland.

Also at SPA, “Primordial: Works by Kate Arslambakova” fills the Third Floor Gallery. Arslambakova is the SPA Studio Resident 2022-23. Her bright abstract work of shape and color, movement and rest, is inspired by the microscopic world.

“Deep Impressions: Elinor Randall, Master Printmaker,” in the Second Floor Gallery, features her work across decades. Rich in symbolism, Randall’s images often feature animals, particularly horses, their labor often connecting to that of women. Randall died this July.

This exhibition opened in the summer and has been held over to give more viewers the opportunity to see her work.



Elinor Randall: “The Insect Palace Presides (Golden Gates Fields)”, photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

“Rock Solid XXIII,” like its 22 predecessors, inspires awe at the life, grace and compelling work these artists bring from this geologic and unforgiving medium. The show features an extraordinary range of work — formal classical pieces, abstracts, a

pair of portraits, even playful ones. Most, but not all, are of regional stone — Barre granite, Rutland area marble, Iberville shale, found rock.

“Rock Solid XXIII” has been even more of a herculean endeavor than usual. Like much of downtown Barre, SPA suffered water damage in July’s epic flood, including to the historic building’s basement and systems housed there.

Artists who participate in “Rock Solid” were hit hard, too. Heather Milne Ritchie lost work she was preparing for the show with the flooding of her studio. Others who planned to participate could not as they had to focus to flood recovery.

Even with the damage, SPA reopened on July 26, and “Rock Solid XXIII” is on schedule.



Paul Marr Hilliard: “Untitled II”, photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

“I want to demonstrate that we are moving forward. It’s a symbolic gesture to keep doing something that your organization is known for,” Sue Higby, SPA executive director, said.

Beyond the overall theme of stone, other themes connecting artists’ selections in “Rock Solid” often emerge.

“Several things maybe tell a little of the story of our relationship with water or the recent event in particular. Another theme that is threading its way through the show is love. The themes throughout are heartfelt,” said Higby.

“Surfer” by Sophie Bettmann-Kerson, of Worcester, leaps into the water, with its eponymous figure leaning into the motion as a wave curls overhead. In “Cumulo Nimbus” by John Matusz, of Waitsfield, a pair of rough stones seem to float as they are supported on welded steel, evoking clouds. Cumulonimbus clouds are known for yielding wild weather.

Ritchie’s “Let the River Take Us” of slate and quartz fused together, she notes, is “stone and flood remains: collaboration with nature.” From this nature-fused rock emerge a pair of breasts. The Plainfield artist’s other pieces in the show include “Triple Heart” in pink granite, and her witty “Cow Jumping Over the Moon” pieces.

Tenderness pervades in “Flower Picker,” by Paul A. Calter, of Randolph Center, a relief in marble of a woman in flowing gown with an armful of blooms.

B. Amore, of Brandon, brings together photographs of faces with black fossil-laden marble in her “In the Hands of Fate.” Diverse faces — people of many ages and cultures who Amore has photographed — are printed on squares of gauzy silk. They float over the broken piece of stone, with its traces of cephalopods and other creatures that lived over 400 million years ago. Two archivally preserved found gloves — Amore collects and preserves gloves exactly as they are found — seem to hold the ancient and modern group.

On SPA's third floor, the walls burst with the colors and movement of the abstract paintings of Arslambakova's "Primordial." She explains in her artist's statement the inspiration of seeing cells and tissues through a microscope.



Kate Arslambakova: "Primordial Ova (in progress)", photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

"I enjoyed the simplicity and balance of the microscopic world that was usually hidden from view ... Highly influenced by the surrealistic movement, this body of work attempts to bring the primordial microscopic world into focus," she says.

One may see references to mitochondria and Golgi apparatus, ribosomes and membranes, interacting with exuberance. With rich details, bold color and shapes, her canvases explode with vitality.

Studio Place Arts Studio Place Arts presents "Rock Solid XXIII," "Deep Impressions: Elinor Randall, Master Printmaker," and "Primordial: Paintings by Kate Arslambakova," through Oct. 28, at SPA, 201 North Main St. in Barre. Admission is free; hours are 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday; call 802-479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com