

Visual Art Review

Studio Place Arts: Rock Solid XXII brings stone to life

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent
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Paul Marr Hilliard: "Lifespring", photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

A secretive bittern, a bird more often heard than seen, stands among cattails. Its long beak points upward as its body aligns with the vertical leaves.

In this elegant red granite sculpture, the polished finish of the bird's beak and the plant's distinctive "tails" contrast with the softer looking chiseled finish of feathered body and fronds. The elusive bird stands at one with its habitat.

Heather Milne Ritchie, of Plainfield, sculptor and professional granite memorial carver, has worked on "American Bittern" for several years.

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“Rock Solid XXII” opened last week and continues to Oct. 30. It is accompanied by a lifetime survey retrospective of artwork of Ray Brown, which fills other SPA galleries. (More about that show next week.)



Nick Santoro: “Origins”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

The annual “Rock Solid” celebration of stone includes sculpture, assemblages and two- and three-dimensional work. This year, the show features work by 20 artists. Granite, alabaster, slate, marble, found stones, mixed media pieces and paintings are among the media. Works range from palm-sized to the spectacular “Coelacanth” sculpture by John Matusz outside in the SPA Plaza.

“It is so important to share the skills and vision of our local artists. ‘Rock Solid’ is an exciting way to see how artists take a really abundant material and use in incredibly creative ways. When people travel here or local community members come in to see the show, they are always in awe of what the different sculptors have created,” said Sue Higby, executive director of SPA.



Axel Stohlberg: “Corner Stone”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur



Sophia Bettman-Kerson: “In the Garden”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

Many local carvers and sculptors work in the stone industry, but the community sees little of their work as commissions mostly go out of the area. “Rock Solid” has the double benefit of offering artists an annual event to show personal creative work, and the community a place to see it.

“This show gives me the opportunity to push my work in ways that I don’t get to do every day in my studio,” said Ritchie, who is among the sculptors who has been in “Rock Solid” shows since they started in 2000.

“I’m always excited when I go to drop my piece off — getting to see what other people are doing. ... It’s really refreshing,” she said.

Another Ritchie piece is the intensely moving “Homage to Mary Oliver’s Wild Geese” dedicated to her close friend, Tiki Amber, a talented painter and fiber artist, who passed away earlier this year.

Ritchie often brings stone and fabric together and works with the human form, especially female torsos and breasts. In this white marble piece, a flame of brilliant blue and pink yarn bursts forth from the top of a heart on a woman’s chest.

“The sacred heart on the torso is a theme I’ve been developing for years,” said Ritchie.



Heather Milne Ritchie: “Homage to Mary Oliver’s Wild Geese”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

A single blue strand from a small hank of yarn tied with a pink ribbon extends from the sculpture’s pedestal up through the marble into the flame. The yarn was given to Ritchie, complete with its little pink bow, by her friend. The title recalls a meaningful connection with Oliver’s poem, excerpted with the sculpture.

Master sculptor Giuliano Cecchinelli again has several breathtaking pieces here — from “A-Frame” with expressive posture and softly draped coat to delightful “Pink Waterlily and Frog.” In Cecchinelli’s graceful “Santa Anna Wind,” a young woman peers out — head slightly tilted, lithe arms wrapped around her, and hair tumbling in a cascade of curls.

Multi-layered literary connections abound in “Elegy for Septimus and Evans” by Larry Bowling, of Barre.

“This piece refers to Virginia Woolf’s inner life and her novel ‘Mrs. Dalloway,’” Bowling notes in his artist’s statement — which is at SPA and should be read.

Images and material, including stone, connect to the World War I soldiers referenced in the title and to Woolf herself, in this piece considering the human condition and delicate balance in our lives.



Mary Alcantara: “My Maori Stone”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

John Matusz, of Waitsfield, has been bringing steel and stone together in abstract compositions since the 1980s. In “Coelacanth,” in front of SPA, a deeply curved granite shape almost floats above the curves and angles of its steel base. The granite seems almost in motion.

A master of working with found materials, and with an eye for unexpected shapes, Matusz brought together a piece of discarded stone originally in a “U” shape and a section of a massive steel grout drum. The steel drum had been repurposed from an earlier boiler — the array of circular holes in its flat plane once held pipes.

Expert in welding, Matusz has skill and talent in creating structures that hold weighty stone with apparent lightness.

Carving the granite, Matusz was struck by “fin-like” aspects of the shape, forms that brought to mind a 1950s Life Magazine article about the discovery of the Coelacanth, an ancient fish believed to be extinct.

Through the long time that Matusz carved the granite, he did not have a firm preconceived image of its base. His process instead, he explained, was of “spontaneous fabrication,” bringing in other steel elements along with the geometry of the massive bucket section.



René Schall: “Shapes in Space I”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur