

Pastels don't pale in comparison: Art exhibit helps show depth, techniques of pastel artists



"Pure Joy is a Purple Ball" by Alec Hall will be a part of the fourth annual Statewide Juried Pastel Exhibition at The Art Shop in Greensboro.

Toni Lindahl picked up pastels when her children were young. The McLeansville artist was an oil painter. But oil paints don't mix well with children's schedules.

"Oh my gosh, what I had to go through when they would wake up from their naps," Lindahl says. "I had to wash out all the brushes. The paint was dry when I came back."

In an effort to keep up her artwork, Lindahl pulled out a set of 12 pastels she had tucked away. The spontaneity of the medium suited her lifestyle. She could start and stop her work at any time.

Lindahl has worked exclusively in pastels for the past 36 years.

She is the publicity chairwoman for the Pastel Society of North Carolina. PSNC is one of three pastel societies that come together each year for the Statewide Juried Pastel Exhibition. The fourth-annual exhibition, titled "On Common Ground: Pastel Paintings from the Mountains to the Sea," opens Saturday at The Art Shop in Greensboro and continues through June 16. It includes 100 pastel works from members of PSNC, the Piedmont Pastel Society and the Appalachian Pastel Society.

"A show like this is actually spectacular because it combines the efforts of three societies," Lindahl says. "Having artists from different parts of the state is reflected in the subject matter. A Greensboro exhibition is going to get a lot of Bog Gardens, but (with a statewide show), you're going to see subtle landscapes — things you never knew about."

The juried selections were chosen for the exhibition by Teresa Saia, a pastel artist based in Seattle. Saia will travel to North Carolina to give a lecture and demonstration on Saturday in conjunction with the exhibition's opening.

Saia chose from almost 200 submissions. She reviewed digital photographs of the pieces to make her selections, looking at each entry individually two or three times.

"The pastel societies of North Carolina members are extremely accomplished pastel painters," Saia says. "From jurying different shows, this one truly is an advanced group. It was really tough to whittle the paintings down."

For Saia, selecting the first half of the group is an easy decision. Each show has clear standouts. Narrowing the second half is much more difficult. She must consider details and techniques. Sometimes it comes down to one specific area of the painting that doesn't quite fit with the rest. Saia takes the process personally because she remembers the impact of selection or rejection as a beginning artist.

Kurt Weiser, a Waxhaw artist and president of the Piedmont Pastel Society, has two pieces in the show: "Valley Pines" and "Valley Morning." Both works are inspired by the North Carolina landscape. Weiser snaps photographs, picks his favorite features from several photos and combines them into one scene.

"Rather than being a slave to the perfect photo, with my way of doing it, you can create the perfect photo from multiple photos," Weiser says.

He got his start as an artist working in watercolors and acrylics. He began taking classes in pastels, and by the third class, he was hooked. The room for experimentation with pastels appealed to him. He describes it as an "untapped medium."

Many people unfamiliar with pastels think the word "pastel" is solely a descriptor for pale colors, those baby-shower hues of blue, pink and yellow. Other people work with oil pastels in an elementary school art class and think all pastels are just like those.

Soft pastels are different. They are a dry medium made up of ground pigment. They contain minimal binding material, just enough to form the pigment into a stick. Soft pastels vary in firmness, and each one has a different purpose. Artists use pastel pencils to add finishing details, such as whiskers on a cat.

“Generally, when I want the impact of color is when I use the pastels,” says Saia, who also works in oils and watercolors. A common misconception among those unfamiliar with pastels is that they can only achieve pale colors, reminiscent of sidewalk chalk. But the pure pigment of soft pastels allows for rich, vivid colors.

Weiser’s “Valley Morning” is a fanciful display with wild colors: a yellow sky, purple mountains and a red tree line.

“You’ll see it from across the room,” he says. “You may not like it, but at least it’ll catch your eye.”

For the pastel societies, one goal of the show is educating the public about the medium’s potential.

“Their idea of pastels is this enormous piece of chalk,” Weiser says. “And then they see this precise representation of a scene or a portrait, on the other wall a splash of vibrant colors, and they’re blown away that these are pastels.”

Karen Chambers, a pastel artist in Candler and a member of the Appalachian Pastel Society, enjoys pastels because of their flexibility. If she wants to change a color, she simply picks up a different stick; there’s no mixing or adjusting. If she makes a mistake, she brushes it off or goes over the top with another color. She enjoys setting up an easel outdoors for what is known as plein air painting.

“When you’re outside, there is a mood created by being outside,” Chambers says. “If it’s sunny and hot, it affects the colors you’re using. ... If you paint from a photograph, the camera only captures so much. The human eye is so much more perceptive.”

Advancements in supplies for pastel artists, such as archival paper, museum-quality glass and an expanded range of colors, have helped advance the medium.

Ten years ago, pastels and pastel artists were absent from major art publications, Weiser says.

Today, pastel artists show up on those pages and win mixed-media art competitions.

For the artists, the statewide show is similar to a family reunion. They get to talk with fellow artists from across the state that they may only see a couple of times a year. They can share stories, ideas and techniques.

“It’s great how we push each other,” Weiser says. “It helps us get better by seeing each other’s work getting better and better.”

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