

'First Things First' — Putting Art First

By MARILYN J. ROWLAND

"First Things First" is a vibrant and beguiling exhibit of works by 55 accomplished Cape Cod artists, each expressing the theme of what is most important to the artist, what comes first in their lives. The show, produced by the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod and held at the Cotuit Center for the Arts, is a wonderful exploration into what makes us human, and what makes [some of] us artists.

The exhibit can be viewed on many levels, as a great collection of art in many different media by talented contemporary Cape artists, as an exploration into why artists create and what inspires them, and as a means of reaching out to people who might not normally go to art shows, providing an exploration of expression through art.

A focus of the show is to make art accessible to school children and families, and, for that reason, paintings and sculptures are positioned lower on the walls (four feet off the ground rather than the more standard five). This seemingly small move, brings the art closer to the eye level of children (and shorter adults), increasing the physical accessibility of the art.

The exhibit also increases the psychological accessibility of the art, by providing descriptive information about each piece, how it came to be created, or why it is important to the artist. These short stories help draw viewers in.

Barnstable artists are well represented in the show.

Sam Barber of Hyannisport is represented by his "Dancers," graceful figures formed of natural tree branches, enlivened with oil paint and glitter. "I always see figures, movement in trees," Mr. Barber said. "The branches look like dancers. I put the pieces together, play with them, to create these figures."

They are a departure from Mr. Barber's impressionistic paintings of Cape Cod scenery, for which he is widely known.

Clarke Buchanan of Marstons Mills created a cowboy hat of silver maple, using wood from an old tree that once grew in Barnstable. It took him nine hours to shape the hat from the wood on a lathe. He also made a hat stand, using maple from a Falmouth tree.

Carole Ann Danner of Hyannis painted portraits of older people. Before she paints, she talks to her models, writing down their life stories on the backs of the wood panels that she paints on. The portraits, in a kind of primitive abstract-realist style, give importance to their subjects, whose accomplishments may have been forgotten.

Sarah Holl of Hyannis created a large porcelain clay sculpture of horses, with jigsaw-like pieces joined together. Horses are important to her, and she knows their



MARILYN ROWLAND/ENTERPRISE

Mary Jeanne Sarafin, Jimmy Prouty, and Grace Louise Beckwith, all 10th graders at Barnstable High School, work on an art project inspired by the First Things First exhibit.

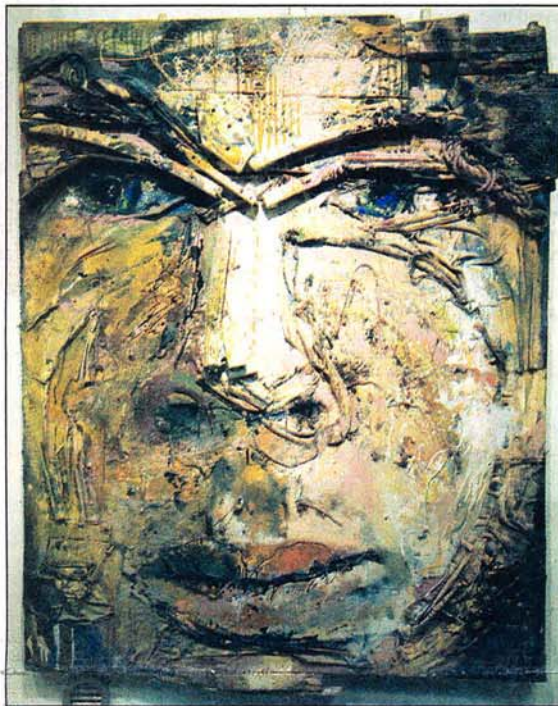


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"Mental Block," mixed media, by Richard Neal of Centerville.

body shapes and forms so well that she did create the sculpture from memory, rather than relying on photographs or models.

The Arts Foundation is hosting school tours of the exhibit. I attended earlier this week when students from Lee Weill's graphic design class at Barnstable High School were there. The students, in grades 9 through 12, were given a guided tour of the exhibit by Arts Foundation Board President Margaret G. Van Sciver and participated in a related arts class with Jessie Nickerson and Michele Law of the Cotuit Center for the Arts.

Ms. Van Sciver introduced the students to the exhibit, explaining the theme and discussing numerous pieces in detail, describing techniques used and the artists' motivations for creating their artwork. She frequently asked them if they liked the art (they usually did, though they were not shy about

offering their opinions) and what they thought the artist might have been thinking. "Why did Sarah Holl make her sculpture so large?" "Why did Penelope Jencks make hers so small?" In both cases, the response was "to draw attention to it."

There are, of course, no right or wrong answers because the artists were not there to confirm or refute the responses, but Ms. Van Sciver did encourage the students to think about the art in various ways.

After the tour, the students were given an opportunity to create their own art, using Ellen LeBow's piece, "There is No First or Last (Cosmic Dance)," as inspiration. Ms. LeBow felt that there is no one thing in a person's life that is more important than the others; they all shape us and influence the person we become. "Cosmic Dance" is a tall rectangular piece in black ink on clayboard. Using carving tools, she created the images by removing the black ink, ex-

posing the white board underneath.

The images in Ms. LeBow's etching are many and varied, including old-fashioned cartoon animals playing musical instruments, a flock of blackbirds, a young couple dancing, and religious-looking figures. Students were asked to create their own "first things" pieces, using small rectangular clay-coated paper covered in black ink and scratching tools. Ms. Nickerson showed them examples of cross-hatching, and told them to think about reversing the values that they would usually use.

There are other projects for younger students. The very young ones create "cave paintings" by drawing simple images on sandpaper. Cave paintings are one of the first forms of art, and thus fit in with the theme.

"Mental Block," a large three-dimensional assemblage portrait by Centerville artist Richard Neal, was the inspiration for middle grade students. Mr. Neal's portrait is made of wood, metal, nails, rope, cloth, and scraps of various other types of material. Close-up, you see a jumble of these components. As you step back, the various surfaces and textures take shape and a face emerges.

Middle grade students are given paper to decorate or draw pictures on with crayon and marker. Then, they cut the drawing in strips, leaving the edges intact, and weave strips of different types of paper and other materials into their drawing, creating their own assemblages.

Ms. Law and Ms. Nickerson said that the students can be very creative, making works of art that inspire their teachers. And Ms. Van Sciver told the students that her favorite works in the exhibit were the ones created by the students.

Clearly the exhibit creates an excellent environment for the appreciation and creation of art. Families are encouraged to attend with their children. Though the art workshops are available only for school groups, a scavenger hunt is offered for all, providing intriguing questions that help visitors look at art in a new way.

The Cotuit Center for the Arts is at 4404 Falmouth Road (Route 28) in Cotuit. Gallery hours are Monday through Saturday, 10 AM to 5 PM. For more information, call 508-428-0669 or visit www.cotuitcenterforthearts.org.