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The arts are in great shape



Written by Britt Beedenbender



ON THIS PAGE: Studio by the Sea photographs of a portrait ("Preston Carter") by Nancy Ellen Craig and of Sam Barber's trio of sculptures, "Dancers." Also, Tom Stringe's photo of his "Rockettes" watercolor.

Cotuit Center exhibition a showcase for the bold and beautiful

Group exhibitions are typically a mixed bag. There are always the standouts, which often balance out what is usually an uneven assemblage of talent. Not so with the new show at the Cotuit Center for the Arts, "First Things First: A Major Exhibition of Over Fifty Cape Cod Artists." Don't be fooled by the "Over Fifty" title; this is not an exhibition of senior artists but a collection of outstanding works by dozens of talented local painters, sculptors and photographers.

An exhibition of this scope would not be complete without the inclusion of some of the area's better-known artists but they are many unexpected surprises as well that encompass an array of media, styles and expression.

While the works of sculptor Joyce Johnson; painters Elizabeth Mumford, Suzanne Packer and Carol Odell; and printmaker Bill Evaul offer definitive examples from each of these artist's body of work, some move beyond what we expect, such as the sculpture of a trio of frolicking dancers by impressionist painter Sam Barber.

Wall texts provide insights from the artists regarding their inspiration or technique and offer a context for the work. George Taylor, a doctor who has found artistic inspiration through x-rays, created *Marine Walz* from a series of x-rays that he performed on plants. The result is a wispy, abstract dance between ethereal creatures whose images have been captured on Japanese "washi" paper.

A three-quarter portrait, painted on a circular canvas, by Nancy Ellen Craig harkens back to 18th century portraiture; its muted tonalities give the appearance of centuries of smoke and shellac. It is of her husband and was one of the few paintings firefighters were able to rescue from her home when it burned to the ground a few years ago.

Sarah Holl's love of horses and their dynamism is forcefully captured in a frieze-like ceramic jigsaw of raw equine power and beauty.

Three-dimensionality figures prominently in a number of the works and does so in a variety of forms. The visual richness of Richard Neal's large-scale mixed media portrait painting *Mental Block* is a nuanced accretion of paint, jeans, wood and rope that blurs the line between abstraction and realism. In stark contrast is Romolo del Deo's exquisite small-scale bronze of a fisherman kneeling in the bow of his boat holding a fish as if in supplication to a deity, its surface and patina capturing all that the medium has to offer.

Award-winning bird carver Sheila Bowen's "Osprey with Large Mouthed Bass" is a tour de force that captures every detail, from the ruffled feathers of the bird's neck to the upturned ridge of the tail feather to the droplets of water that have fallen on the branch on which he has alighted. The osprey is on full alert and one is careful not to get too close for fear of being pecked.

Tom Stringe's richly colored composition of a line of poppies reveals the luminescence that is possible with watercolor and Joanne Stark's complex fabric "painting" of the mountainside village of Pueblo Entre Los Cerros captures the colors and textures of the Mexican landscape.

Presented by the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod and sponsored by the Eastern Bank Charitable Foundation with support from the Donald C. McGraw Foundation and Cape Cod Melody Tent, the exhibition is testament to the Cape's long established artistic heritage and ia reminder of the great breadth of talent that continues to flourish here.

First Things First is at the Cotuit Center for the Arts on Route 28 through Feb. 6, Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free.