

Good afternoon! Thanks for coming back to see the show once more before it closes.

It has been an honor to partner with Artspace on this project. If you didn't already know, the organization that made this show happen has been around since 1988. And Artspace helped establish the First Fridays Art Walk in the downtown area of Richmond. Artspace has been providing a place for area artists to show their work for decades. This is a new space for Artspace, but their mission has stayed the same! So I felt incredibly privileged to be invited to be the Juror and Curator of this show. And I was pleased to choose these outstanding works for exhibition out of nearly 400 submissions I was given to jury.

An exhibition like this offers us a snapshot of the artistic sensibility of a community. It doesn't represent its totality, but it does portray a broad cross-section of the creative endeavors and multiplicity-of-approach employed by makers in our area. Jurying the art poses quite a challenge, as it is the juror's task to assess the quality of the work and make choices about what to include in order to build a cohesive statement with the show. My choices were based on a dynamic assessment of merit, and an interest in diversity of perspective and identity, followed by an analysis of the common threads that bound such a diverse group of artworks together.

Before I move forward, it is important to mention that one of the criteria for submissions for this show was that the work be made between 2019 and the present. That span of time is charged with meaning for all of us.

A remarkable work of art has the capacity to open a door to the mind of its maker, while also engaging some element of its cultural milieu. The pieces included in this show—whether their makers intended or not—engaged me in a narrative that all of us have been entangled in for the past few years. A chronicle of loss, fear, and isolation, but also of hard work, introspection, and creative growth. A curious byproduct of a lock-down in the interest of public safety has been that it offered many of us a time away from the hustle and bustle of normal life—giving us space to breathe, to think, to create. We had an opportunity to make the work that we had longed to make.

A profound change was put upon us and our lives have been shaped by this change. That is the sensibility that knits this work together. It's not that all of the art in this show is a meditation on the pandemic, but it is the case that when viewed through the particular lens of this time, the exhibition tells a multivalent story about our collective experience. And it is refreshing to review the work and be reminded that these years need not be relegated to a sense of melancholy—that is not the only story here. There is exuberance, humor, curiosity, and determination. There are delicate punctuations of our anxieties juxtaposed with energetic expressions of love and connection. This kind of show invites artists from a variety of backgrounds, at various stages in their careers, to show their work together. That convergence of perspectives beautifully articulates the complex zeitgeist of the pandemic years.

Three artists were awarded cash prizes in honor of the technical and conceptual merit of their work. These three artworks stood out in particular as brilliant realizations of the network of issues I see at the heart of the exhibition.

The intense, direct gaze of Rebecca Shkeyrov's painting, *Self Portrait with Old Home*, builds a triangular relationship between the viewer, the artist's depiction of self, and the emblematic home in the distance. Part of the composition of the work is completed by the audience standing before it, unsettlingly made the secondary focal point of the work as we take in the stare of the artist-subject. We regard and we are regarded—a visual relation that the isolation of pandemic-time has spared us in certain ways. The enigmatic presence of the house is at once ominous and inviting. And this is a thematic recurrence throughout the exhibition—the complex identity of home. There is a spectrum of approach and a lot of ambiguity here. Is home the place we find solace, build relationships, engage in our rituals of domesticity? The private space, the locus of safety from the dangers outside. Or is it the claustrophobic space of lock-down, the prison of housebound days and quarantining? A place where relationships were strained and broken by too much time and proximity. We have a tangled relationship with home now. Shkeyrov's painting invites you to feel how deeply that is the case.

Joseph Medina DaSilva's *Thirteen Sins* is an ebullience of color. Rooted in the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, the materiality of paint is on full display and is masterfully handled, engaging the viewer and eliciting a powerful response without the implication of narrative or representation. Driven by a bright, primary palette, the piece is almost cheerful—lithe strokes in a well-balanced dance across the picture plane. But spending time with *Thirteen Sins*, the full scope of its nature becomes more evident. Grounding the color-play and defining the composition, a flux of large black and white shapes slows the tempo of the work. By contrast, the frenetic energy of the marks above becomes nearly overwhelming. And the more time you spend reckoning between the monochromatic glacial element and its spritely vibrant counterpart, the more arresting the painting becomes. It is alive with dichotomies and deeply evocative of emotion. One of the greatest qualities of Visual Art is the invitation it gives us to conceive of our lives outside of the mundane boundaries of language. To see something and let it move us on an instinctual level. Abstraction certainly has an incredible capacity to do this. I left my first encounter with *Thirteen Sins* feeling its strong kinship to my interior life as it has developed during the pandemic's highs and lows.

I was thrilled by so many facets of our Best In Show prizewinner, *Planet Henri*, by Emma Knight. At first glance, the reference to turn-of-the-century French painter Henri Rousseau's post-impressionist masterpieces had me hooked. Rousseau's jungle paintings balanced a kind of Edenic dream of the natural world with the reality of the savage garden of nature. The well-appointed tropical houseplants that had captured the fancy of fin-de-siecle Europe were ripped from their safe domestic interiors and cast back into the wild, framing surprisingly brutal encounters between predator and prey. Emma Knight's painting samples Rousseau's botanical stage setting, but floods it with a cast of otherworldly characters. Jellied amoebic creatures, beings made of bristle and down, and ethereal orbs invade the space in an effluvial parade. They are whimsical and almost lovable. Their character feels natural floating in Rousseau's garden. But there is also this little UFO-shaped, red-eyed entity hiding in the leaves that seems to signal something about invasion. The story takes a turn. Is this an invasion? As strange microbial interlopers have hijacked our lives in real time, I find myself distrusting of these seemingly innocuous little floaters. After all, haven't the past few years felt strangely like science fiction? So *Planet Henri* places me firmly in my moment. And as a result, I return to Rousseau's savage

gardens in which predator pounces on prey, suggesting that we are in the grip of an intrinsically natural moment in time—part of the Earth and its terribly natural machinations. It is an unsettling artwork because it lays bare that uncomfortable truth. I also find comfort in recognizing that a work of art can emerge in a time of crisis, and yield revelations about how we see ourselves and the world we live in with such clever declaration.

So, there is some insight into decisions I made in curating. I'm pleased to have been able to share my ideas about the work with you. And here is the beauty part of this and any art exhibit you will attend—the meaning and the context of the work will always be yours to assess and appreciate on your own terms. Regardless of the aim of a group-show juror to offer an objective approach, all of us are deeply subjective when it comes to the notions that move us. So I encourage you to revisit the show with my concept in mind, and to enrich it with your own perspective. Consider which pieces you would have chosen to honor with an award. Talk with the folks around you about how the work makes you feel, and think critically about how you come to those conclusions. We are fortunate to live in a community that produces such amazing artwork, and equally fortunate to be afforded a place like Artspace that fosters creativity and discourse to nurture our hearts and minds.

Thanks again for coming out!

-Jacob Daroca-Kincheloe