

Judge's Statement for NIA All-Members Exhibit at Heartland Artists Gallery

by Matthew Celmer – Director, MoonTree Studios – April 2024

Judge's Honor

It is always such an honor and exciting opportunity to interact with the art produced by the NIA, whether through hosting or selecting awards. The latter only gets more difficult as time goes on. I continue to be impressed by the breadth and depth of artwork coming from this group. This exhibit is special in that this art occupied a new space thanks to the recent location change of Heartland Artists Gallery.

I had the luxury of solitude for the first portion of my judging (thankfully prior to my selections) and then the gift of a flood of guests, visitors, and artists that brought a wave of energy into the space that I'm sure will continue to gain momentum and completely transform the building, the downtown, and our entire community. Every artist in this exhibit has contributed their own ripples of beauty to that transformation and I am truly grateful to have witnessed it firsthand.

The diversity of mediums always presents a challenge when judging and my aim was to represent as many mediums as possible in my selections because all the artists displayed comparable skill and technique in their chosen format.

Judge's Awards

Mercurial Mood struck me as a blend of realism and expressionism. The color choices, visual content, and strong brush strokes all give appropriate credence to the title. Mercury is often tied to communication and relationships. A common astrological trope is to blame Mercury being in retrograde for a breakdown in one or both. Here, however, the artist effectively communicates a mood and energy that goes beyond words and fills the viewer with visual cues that invite you into the energy, atmosphere, and aura of the artist at the time of the painting.

Red Ranunculus is a skillful composition shared by the photographer and the flower itself. An entire universe unfolds in visually stunning and immaculate detail. Those who have not attempted to take up close and personal images of the natural world might be lost on the difficulty to perfect this art. This particular flower lends itself to the challenge in a way that disguises the struggle. The final image no doubt a labor of love both on the part of the flower and the photographer.

In Search of a Better Life kept drawing me back towards it as if following the woman in her search. I found myself wanting to know who she was, what life she was leaving behind, and whether she would find what she was looking for. Maybe this is a particular historical or mythological figure or maybe she reflects all women of all times. Just like her, the artist makes bold choices; stroke, style, and technique. The risks the artist takes in this piece work out for the better and hopefully so too does the search for the woman (and womankind) it depicts.

Merit Awards

Long Way Home was another piece that I kept being drawn back to. Its size is deceptive in its grandeur as many might find pastoral scenes. I think of the irony of people taking for granted the gift of a flat horizon or any open field. When looking into the frame, it's as if looking through a small window, or maybe a rearview mirror. Admittedly unfamiliar with gouache as a medium, I could not help but be impressed by the detail and skill on display.

Fat Idea is simply fun! Though squirrel's tails are not as dangerous as this one's, they no doubt have that illusory effect on certain would-be predators. It might be appropriate to be located so near the ground where we often see squirrels, but I think this little one definitely deserves a pedestal on which to rest in his abundance.

Light Exists Even in the Dark is a scene within a scene. I had to keep changing my perspective to see if what I was seeing in the reflection of the water was actually a reflection on the glass; that's how effectively the artist conveys that visual phenomenon. And to achieve that feat with pastels will never cease to amaze me.

Beatrice Hartig Zimmerman Memorial Award

Dancer in the Doorway is another piece that plays with the relationship between light and dark. This one uses the stark contrast to effectively accentuate the subject. The content particularly struck me as an appropriate selection for this memorial award as Beatrice Hartig Zimmerman helped open and lead artists through the doorway of creativity as a charter member of the NIA.

Carolyn Jagodits Memorial Award

Cade's Cove is another gouache scene whose detail caught my eye. I found myself wishing it was hung just a bit lower so I could get lost in the trees. Though maybe its position being just out of reach is appropriate given the majestic landscape it depicts. Within sight, but still out of reach.

NIA Memorial Award

El Chisme struck me as an appropriate work to honor all those NIA artists gone before and those to come. In the skeletal subject, I see an appropriate representation of all artists; being on the creative edge often isolated or kept separate from the rest of society and choosing not to simply take a bite of the apple, but to engage in a deep dialogue throughout the night with the snake who offered it.

Glenda Cobb Bixby Award for Expressionistic Work

In the Midst of Stone-Faced Acquaintances serves as an excellent example of expressionistic work. I see both a joy in being different and sticking out from the crowd as well as a carefree spirit who will not be deterred from a good time by the rigidity of those around. In existential terms our subject chooses to live exuberantly while the acquaintances are resigned to a living death.