

Judge's Statement

Mark Rospenda

Selecting awards for an exhibition of artworks as diverse as those we see here is tricky business. All art has a shared history which it is always inherently in conversation with. But so does every media. So how does one objectively judge a photograph against a pastel painting? Or a watercolor against a steel sculpture? To make things even trickier, the artwork in this exhibition did not have to align to a specific theme. What criteria can be used?

In lieu of specific criteria, I asked myself questions while looking at these artworks:

- Is the artwork using a particular media in an unexpected way?
- Is the technical handling of the media in line with what I believe the artist is trying to express through the artwork?
- What is the artwork saying in relation to the history of the media?
- What is the artwork saying in relation to our contemporary condition?
- What is my gut reaction to the artwork?

If I felt I could adequately answer these questions for an artwork, it would pass my “test” and I would consider it for an award. That in no way means that an artwork is “bad” if I wasn’t able to answer those questions. But being asked to be a juror for an exhibition implies that you were invited for your particular opinion. And in my opinion, these questions search for qualities I find important in any work of art.

There are 50 artworks in the exhibition and I was asked to select 6 awards, listed here in alphabetical order. Each was engaging as I asked my questions.

JUDGE'S AWARDS

Mary Pence Bagiackas, Didn't Listen, Acrylic on canvas
Anne Marie Peck, Tranquility, Watercolor
Laurie Rousseau, Femininity, Monotype print

MERIT AWARDS

Sunday Mahaja, Unbroken, Painted steel
Susan Pelka, The Creek on Trowbridge's Farm, Acrylic
Barbara Walsh, Gliding Through Winter, Watercolor

Mary Pence Bagiackas's, Didn't Listen, is an expression of the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments. In the painting, Moses has just returned from the mountaintop with the Ten Commandment stone tablets. He has thrown down and broken them after seeing the golden idol the Israelites are worshipping. Many images of this moment throughout art history evoke a sense of wrath and anger from Moses or God. Here, however, Bagiackas's focus is on an overwhelming sense of love as expressed by rays of light and the literal symbolic heart on God's chest that is threatening to burst outward from the painted surface.

By representing the landscape so clearly, Anne Marie Peck's, Tranquility, engages almost all of the senses. Based on past experience, a viewer can infer how cool the water might feel and what it sounds like as it makes its way around the rocks, how warm the sun is, the smell of the forest, and how quiet the deer is on the opposite bank. The artwork transports me to a moment of peace — something I feel we can all use after what felt like a tumultuous 2024.

The figure in Laurie Rousseau's, Femininity, is in direct conversation with ancient carved female sculptures like the Venus of Willendorf (ca. 24,000–22,000 BCE), Cycladic (ca. 3,200–2,000 BCE), and other Neolithic “venus” figures. Like many of those sculptures, the emphasized shape of the hips in Rousseau's monotype speaks to fertility and reproduction. The masterful layered echoes of the female form to each side of the central figure give a sense of solidarity with those women who came before us—whether they lived a single generation or tens of thousands of years ago.

In *Unbroken*, Sunday Mahaja transforms pieces of cut steel, a length of pipe, and even a threaded bolt into a surprisingly scaled flower and dragonfly. We also see that the flower grows from a larger stem that has been snipped. Altogether with the title, Mahaja presents us with a sculpture that carries a message of resilience and hope.

Similarly to Peck's *Tranquility*, I find myself transported by Susan Pelka's *The Creek on Trowbridge's Farm*. However, I'm slightly unsettled when I find myself there. The light seems somewhat otherworldly. Trees lack shadows where one might expect to see them. And my attention is drawn to the care with which individual leaves have been represented on the trees in the foreground. Overall, the space feels surreal and reminds me of paintings by Henri Rousseau (1844–1910). This particular bend in the creek seems peaceful, but also like it might have some surprises in store come nightfall (or maybe I've just been reading too much Stephen King).

Gliding Through Winter, by Barbara Walsh, hit me with a gut punch of joy. The swooping brushwork, variety of vibrant colors worn by the skiers, and the disregard for a realistic representation of scale imparts a sense of play in its making that also brings focus to the joy one might feel skiing fast down a snowy mountain slope in the company of friends.

6 awards out of 50 seems like a pretty gracious percentage. But there were so many works that stood out to me and were just as deserving of awards. Some of those include Vasilisa Kiselevich's *Red Barn*, which can simultaneously be understood as pro- or anti-Trump, based on the perspective a viewer brings with them. Mary Firtl and Cathy McCormick's soft pastel paintings reaffirm my belief that they are absolute masters of their craft. I applaud Joan Spohrer's exploration of digital media in *A Dutch House*. The way she's enlivened the focal point of the image while leaving the adjacent buildings as line art — moving from incompleteness to completeness — evokes a sense of animation. Diane Thornton's *Apples and Bananas*, seems to add an unexpected vortex to the center of a conventional still life. Linda Fritschner brings the spirit of Monet's haystack paintings (1890–1891) to the rust belt by capturing a dormant train car in different seasons. And by contrast, the relative “loudness” of the bright flowers in the foreground of Michelle Engel's *Morning Mist*, heightens the quiet of the soft mists in the background.

An exhibition like this reaffirms how important the NIA is to South Bend and Northern Indiana by creating community and opportunities for countless artists since its founding in 1942. This ultimately makes everyone's lives richer and more vibrant, and I thank you all for the opportunity to experience what you've made. And I can't wait to see what you make next!