

"Best of the Best" at Rossetti Fine Art in Pompano Lives Up to Its Billing

By Michael Mills

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John Patrick Kelly



Masterpiece: *Uncle Whirley's Gig*.

Details:

"Best of the Best." On display through January 4 at Rossetti Fine Art, 132 SW 15th St. (McNab Road), Pompano Beach. Call 954-247-9580.

Calling an exhibition "Best of the Best" is all but asking for trouble, but a new show by that name, now at Rossetti Fine Art in Pompano Beach, delivers what it promises. Gallery owner Tom Rossetti, an artist himself and a veteran judge of art shows around town, hit on the idea of gathering a group of artists upon whom he had bestowed Best in Show awards. It's a simple but inspired concept.

The exhibition includes seven artists, all active and well-known locally. There's not a stinker in the bunch, and two or three of them are among the top artists now working in South Florida. Each artist is represented by about seven pieces.

I don't recall seeing or writing about the work of Nancy Herkert, a mixed-media artist who incorporates an amazing variety of materials into her art. A typical piece might include bits of string and fabric (including lace), along with old photographs, safety pins, and a layer of translucent wax. Sometimes items are sewn

onto the canvas. Other times, words appear to have been scrawled or etched onto the surfaces. Much of her work is suffused with the sense of ritual.

Susan Hanssen specializes in watercolor, a misunderstood medium often appropriated by people who use it to create oh-so-nice still lifes and landscapes. Combining it with gouache, however, Hanssen returns it to its painterly roots. She manipulates it with such great subtlety that you can hardly believe this is the same medium used by so many Sunday-afternoon artists to generate blotchy mediocrities. I only wish there weren't such a sameness to her work here. The ordinary realism of *The Waitress* suggests that she's capable of much greater variety.

Two of the artists work primarily in three dimensions, and their pieces round out the exhibition in welcome ways; there's something inherently appealing about seeing a gallery dotted with sculptures. A representative Ari Hirschman piece is built around forms based on the human head that have been compressed from the sides, flattened to exaggerate their features into the realm of caricature. Often the heads rest upon tall, thin metal rods embedded in thick steel cubes. Sometimes, like in the case of *The March*, the works extend up to five and a half feet tall.

Eli Pupovac, by contrast, is mainly a ceramicist. To judge from most of his work featured here, he's lately infatuated by doughnuts as subject matter. His oversized pastries are as

heavily glazed as the real thing. For the minimalist *South Florida Donut*, the glossy pink glaze appears to be literally melting off the surface. I much prefer the matter-of-fact realism of *Spill*, a larger-than-life rendition of an overturned box of popcorn.

These four artists alone would make for a fine group show, but "Best of the Best" ups the ante by including a triumvirate of South Florida's best figurative painters: Bonnie Shapiro, Alfred Phillips, and John Patrick Kelly. I've followed the work of all three for several years now, and each just keeps getting better.

Shapiro is the most atmospheric of the three. Whether she's documenting the end-of-the-day commute (*Evening Exodus*) or portraying a nondescript diner and the cars and trees surrounding it (*McNab and Andrews*), Shapiro grasps that there's something ineffably distinctive about the air in South Florida at twilight. Here she also includes a few canvases that reveal a fascination with carnival life, which she similarly douses with hazy ambiance.

The enormously versatile Phillips is also immersed in what gives our region its unmistakable qualities. Lately he has embarked on a series of botanicals — there's a cluster of them here — that set out to capture the feel of subtropical foliage. Looking at the marvelous play of light and shadow among the branches of *Tree*, you're apt to think, "Only in South Florida." He's also enamored with textures, as in the contrasting different-sized panels that make up *Red Pier*, perhaps his best work in the exhibition.

It's Kelly, however, who steals the show here. Having never met the man, I have no idea whether he's as eccentric as his work, but I can't think of another painter in the area whose work so seamlessly combines technical dexterity with surrealist whimsy, not to mention an eye for telling details. *Little Blanche's First Outdoor Recital*, for instance, gives us the title character, her eyes shut in musical reverie as she plays her accordion. The catch is that she's levitating a few feet off the ground, and that visual gag is enhanced by another throwaway, a rooster strutting on the ground below.

Kelly's cracked sensibility scales heights of grandeur with a huge oil called *Uncle Whirley's Gig*, which features a grinning, outrageously outfitted man strumming a guitar while sitting on a little cart staked to the ground. Another rooster, a Dalmatian, and a tiny female figure in the distance flesh out the scene, all portrayed in loving detail. It's the show's comic masterpiece.

"Best of the Best" is just Rossetti's third formal exhibition in this location, a small but airy, well-lit space in an anonymous Pompano strip mall. Given the precarious nature of the gallery scene in the Fort Lauderdale area, I can't wait to see what he springs on us next.