

Collage exhibit goes way beyond cut paper and paste

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AMY J. BARRY, Special to The Day



“Dormant” by Kathy Johnson of Waterford; tissue paper, wood skewers, tea bag paper and tea grounds, book pages and leaf “skeletons” on paper (Courtesy Spectrum Art Gallery)

Merriam-Webster defines a collage as a work of art made by attaching pieces of different materials (such as paper, cloth or wood) to a flat surface.

“Collage - It’s an Adventure,” on exhibit at the Spectrum Art Gallery in Centerbrook, presents splendid examples of how an artist’s imagination and skill can stretch and improvise on this basic definition, creating mesmerizing mixed media works, all with their own signatures.

The collages on exhibit by 20 artists, mostly from Connecticut and a few from Rhode Island and New York, incorporate materials as diverse as watercolor and wood to sterling silver and pieces of undergarments — and subject matter inspired by everything from politics to protecting nature to an exploration of language and poetry.

“I wanted to show the variety of materials used in collage — that’s the underlying concept in the show — and I also wanted to show how collage can range from very abstract to pieces that suggest realistic images,” says Barbara Nair, gallery director and show curator.

“Each piece I felt had to tell some kind of story,” she adds, “and have the kind of composition that allows the viewer to go into the piece and make up (his or her) own story, even if the artist didn’t say what the story was. One of the things I was looking for was balance and harmony, even in the most abstract pieces.”

Collage has evolved over the years. Nair observes that the form is taking more risks with materials than it did in the past and many artists are pushing the envelope in the ways in which they combine unusual materials, along with paint and paper in their work.

One thing that has remained consistent is the use of found objects.

“The artists find objects at flea markets, in their travels, all kinds of places,” Nair says. “Objects speak to them. They like the textures, colors, finishes, and they use them in their collages. They’re great collectors.”

Exhibit highlights

Kathy Johnson of Waterford is an example of an artist who sees the beauty in the discarded, collecting recycled and found materials from her daily life to use in her work. She says she’s always on the lookout for new and interesting materials, asking herself, “Can I reuse this?” before throwing anything away.

Johnson’s piece “Dormant” illustrates her collecting instincts. The pleasing composition is made up of tissue paper, wood skewers, tea bag paper and tea grounds, book pages and leaf “skeletons,” all mounted on paper.

“I like the lacy feeling of the leaf images, the use of text behind it, and the lovely color tones,” Nair says. “She uses relatively realistic images in an abstract composition.”

Jill Vaughn of Ivoryton is known for her fresh and vibrant use of color as evidenced in her large-scale collage titled “Ocean Tied” in watercolor, pen and cut paper.

“I love the composition and the freedom she expresses in it,” Nair comments. “Some collages pretend to be freeform and lively, but this one actually is — even though she obviously thought it through very carefully. It has a wonderful use of the colors and (sense of) movement of water.”

Jill Butler of Essex has four found-object collages out of a series of 14 in the show. She gathered the materials in Paris, Normandy, and near her home in Connecticut.

One of these on exhibit, “Balancing the Being and Doing,” “balances” such elements as an old wooden hanger and dried roses on a wooden level, placed on paper with cut out pieces of maps.

“Jill’s a great traveler and lived in France for many years,” Nair says. “She will take found objects that speak to her — a lot of them very old — that tend to go with images that have almost an archival, historical feel to them. She tells her story through her collages. They have a (feeling of) harmony, but tend to be a lot more composed than some of the other artists’ work.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Barbara Hanson of Guilford uses state-of-the-art technology to create digital photo collages using digital equipment and imaging software. She uses digital layering or masking techniques, combining two or more images into fascinating artistic compositions.

Her collages in the show take their titles and inspirations from the names of songs, such as the traditional “Maple Leaf Rag” by Scott Joplin and the more current “Into the Mystic” by Van Morrison.

“These are bold and beautifully composed images and I wanted to show that collage can take the form of digital art — not necessarily on canvas or board,” Nair notes. “This work is very contemporary in terms of how people think about collage.”



“Reflection of the Mind II” by Marco Gallotta of New York City; cut paper and acrylic inks (Courtesy Spectrum Art Gallery)

Several other cutting edge collage artists include Beverly Waters of Madison, who creates large and small sculptural wall pieces using pipes, hinges and a variety of metals; and Marco Gallotta, an Italian born, New York City-based artist who has several pieces in the show that consist of painstakingly detailed paper cutting techniques, drawing, painting and printmaking.

Frieda Howling of Stratford has two assemblages (a more traditional, sculptural form of collage) in the show that tell stories about Richard Nixon and Laurel and Hardy.

IF YOU GO

What: “Collage - It’s an Adventure” **Where:** Spectrum Art Gallery, 61 Main St., Centerbrook

When: Through Sept. 13; the gallery is open Wednesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.; and Sunday from 11:30 a.m. 5 p.m.

Info: Visit www.spectrumartgallery.org or call (860) 767-0742