

PAINTING THE TOWN by Karen Braun Malpas

The current show at the Frank Bette Center is the immensely popular annual Plein Air Paintout. Forty artists came from as far away as Maryland and Colorado to paint our local scene and now exhibit what they saw.

For the viewer, it is a valuable opportunity to literally see the world as others see it. While many artists chose to paint the things that are unique to Alameda, the nouns, the things such as boats, houses, trees, bodies of water, others used the locale to expand their vision out of the specific into the general. Their paintings are "about" organization, light, color and shapes.

When Ed Bertolet goes out at dawn to paint, it is less specifically a "Crab Cove Sunrise" than it is land,water,sky in a timeless, eternal daybreak. Cat Stevens would have seen it as "morning has broken, like the first morning."

Similarly, Markus Lui, the fluent watercolorist whose second language is watercolor, may have situated himself by the "Encinal Shops" but the result is a universal pathway leading to and through any commercial development with rampant foliage leaning into the pathway and into the pictorial format.

Locals will be delighted by the paintings which immortalize Alameda landmarks. Garr Crookston painted "Oles" famous waffle house and also "High Street Playhouse". Laura Williams and Mark Monsarrat were smitten with the distinctive facade of "Spritzers" coffee shop. Lisa Greenstein captured the head-turning green flower shop at "Santa Clara and Oak" which has a fortuitously red pickup parked in front of it as well as the only "Little House Cafe" we know painted in precisely those colors. Carol Rudisill paints a deep shot of "Park st. Flags" which includes the historic old firehouse building featured on antique postcards when Park st. was still dirt.

Jason Skyle Conn saw clean muscular beauty in the order of industrial buildings. "A Block of Cheese", a no-nonsense building, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Victorians of 5-7 colors with metallic trim.

There were several watercolor painters this year. Sara Kahn did large formats featuring broad areas of overlapped color which evoke silk screen prints. John Hewitt also produced some very large format pieces. He used large brushes, large gestures and a fearless attack of raw color to produce open, breezy images. The paintings of Justin Pastores are skillful orchestrations which speak to his refined instincts loosed with focused surity. It is often his calligraphic linear elements, weaving into and over the masses of color which pull the composition together.

Stunning use of light is found in Rhonda Egans "Waiting to Play III", a lagoon scene which is literally flooded with light. Paul Feinberg's paintings have an uncommon clarity the partial result of strong values side by side as seen on the dappled wall near the "Temple Gate."

We could decide on a theme, skies for example, and go through the show looking at the many, many different handlings of sky....the different colors, presence or absence of clouds, flat or active brushwork, utilitarian backdrop or moody presence, etc. Or, we could examine the way the artists divided their formats, what percent was allotted to water versus land for example. Or we could see how many ways cars were articulated. Forty artists interpreted Alameda and we get to interpret their work...a most fortuitous relationship.