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Process Imitates Art

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HUNTING FOR INSPIRATION. Hunter, an oil painting by Lisa Costanzo, is one example of the revealing work at Behind the Images. The exhibition is on show at the Suffolk University Art Gallery through Jan. 3.

The South End is full of exciting, talented artists, and the local gay community has long enjoyed a storied history as a pronounced presence in that cultural scene. There are literally countless local artists that warrant a deserving, closer look at their work, and Behind the Image, an exhibition currently showing at the New England School of Art and Design at Suffolk University (Suffolk University Gallery, 75 Arlington Street, www.suffolk.edu/nesad) happens to offer an inside look at the artistic process of two gay South End artists.

We caught up with Lisa Costanzo and John Guthrie to learn more about their work, but the show speaks for itself. Be sure to visit the gallery (free and open to the public) before the show closes on Jan. 3, 2009. (Hours: Monday - Friday 9 a.m. to 11 p.m., Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.).

Hunting for inspiration

A walk in the park sounds like the kind of experience that is likely to inspire an artist. But for South End artist Lisa Costanzo, the inspirational walk was not her own; it was her dog's.

"I have a dog Olivia, and we go for long walks," says Costanzo. "We go for walks in parks, and she loves to hunt squirrels. The idea of her hunting became a metaphor for me searching, hunting, and looking for ideas in my work."

Those ideas came to fruition in "Hunter", one of several pieces that Costanzo has contributed to Behind the Image. The oil painting, a self-portrait of Costanzo in the pale faced makeup, rouged cheeks, bouffant hair and elaborate dress of an 18th century Parisian courtesan, contains plenty of clues to those pensive park walks that inspired it: dogs peering into the curlyque waves of the towering wig, and a glamorous swan sitting perched atop Costanzo's skull like the final creative brainchild of her seeking.

Of course, seeking inspiration is quite different than sharing it. But Costanzo says she had no hesitation about participating in Behind the Image, a show designed to spotlight the creative process that goes on within the artist's

mind and behind their every brush stroke. For example, the final "Hunter" painting is presented side by side with an early, unfinished incarnation.

"I certainly don't mind sharing it [the process]," says Costanzo. "Of course, we have our artist statements, but actually, sometimes I find it's easier for me to share things visually."

In fact, though Costanzo has lived in the gallery-laden South End neighborhood for around 20 years - and has maintained a studio space at 450 Harrison Ave. for the past ten years - she adds that the Suffolk show provided an opportunity to "peek into the artist's studio and how they work," that has been somewhat lacking locally, at least lately.

"Before I was part of the SoWa arts community, open studios was one time a year, an 'art holiday,' if you will," says Costanzo, who originally hails from Connecticut. She attended Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts and, besides creating her art, works a day job as creative director for the Boston Public Health Commission. "It was something to look forward to and it had some mystery about it; going into the studios not knowing what you'd find, it had an edge and grittiness. ... It seems that as a whole we currently tend to open our doors up too much, and feel the need to slick up the space, hide all the fun stuff, and transform it into a gallery and scramble to see who can produce the biggest posters and more marketing materials."

"With that said, it is a wonderful art community, a cool destination, and a good place to be. I just think the volume needs to be turned down a bit," she adds.

One place where the volume does stay quite high is in Costanzo's work, where she says nearly everything she does has "some element of exaggeration in it." Specifically, she tends to draw from various historical periods and the hair, costumes, and masks that define the eras.

"It helps me explore issues of identity," says Costanzo. And though she is gay, she adds that sexuality is just one of many personal facets explored through her work. "My work certainly engages gender," she says. "But it's really about my collective identity: personal history, family, gender. Being gay is a piece of that, but it's not the whole."

Life after Death of a Salesman

Watching a movie really can change your life. In the case of John Guthrie, it was "Death of a Salesman" on a first date, and the date had nothing to do with his epiphany.

"I just watched that movie and I knew when I saw that, that I had to quit that job right away," said Guthrie of his decision to become an artist after 10 years of working as an aerospace engineer. "I mean it really changed my life watching that movie. It was like a first date with this guy and I couldn't even speak...I just had this huge knot in my throat, because you know I didn't want to cry on my date," he recalled laughing. "I just vowed at that time to quit engineering."

And he did. Guthrie gave himself a year to get a portfolio together while still living in Connecticut, where he had moved to pursue his engineering career. He applied to a number of art schools before choosing Mass Art and making the decision to move to Boston. He's been here, pursuing his love for art, ever since.

Although the career switch happened much later in his life, Guthrie, now 47, has always known he wanted to pursue art. "I had always wanted to be a painter my whole life, ever since I can remember I was going to be an artist. Then, somehow, I got pushed into engineering when I was in high school," he recalls. "I did that and I really hated every minute of it."

Now able to do what he loves, Guthrie creates paintings that are both contemporary and abstract, using design and color to pull the viewer into a different viewing dynamic. His main goal is to combine colors that make each hue pop to surprise the viewer.

"I try to make color bend, I try to put colors together in a way that makes colors react differently than they would normally and create surprises and strange vibrations and optical effects that you wouldn't know necessarily how they were achieved," he explains.

His interest in optical effects and the physics of light has spurred his interest in color and the different ways he can create the grand feeling on a small, intimate canvas.

"Each series or work has a different sort of inspiration," said Guthrie of the ideas behind his paintings. Guthrie has created a number of series, titled *Watercolors*, *Ribbons*, *Stars*, *Space*, *Cells I & II*, *Curves*, and *Drips*.

"The cells are more influenced by the crystal structures of minerals, that's where I came up with those, looking at the structures. The idea for drips [was] more about a response to how much dripping and splashing goes on in contemporary painting," said Guthrie. "I just decided to make the actual drip."

Based on his studies and work with math and engineering for a large part of his life, Guthrie is inspired and influenced strongly by these types of structures and processes.

"I think I do reference a lot of science," said Guthrie of his art. "I'm definitely influenced by abstract ideas about math and science."

Of course, the process of thinking up a painting is not immediate, and Guthrie explains that it can be a long process over ten or fifteen years. "It's figuring out how to make the paintings you have in your mind. You might discover some technique or invent some idea about painting and you realize you can go back and make some of the drawings you have had for years and years...that's kind of how I work," explained Guthrie of his creative process.

Besides his show at the Suffolk University Art Gallery, Guthrie has a solo show on display in the lobby of the FP3 condo complex in Fort Point. The building is an up-and-coming modern complex consisting of 92 loft, terrace, and penthouse suites along with the art gallery, a bar, and a number of restaurants.

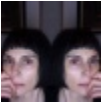
Maybe it's the success he's found in Boston, or maybe it's that he's quit the job that forced him to live a lie the same way Willy Loman was, but Guthrie is content just where he is. There's no doubt the galleries he's displayed in play a large part in that happiness.

"That was a long time ago," Guthrie said of his decision to quit his career as an engineer. "I never looked back and I don't miss it at all."



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