

ART REVIEW

‘OBJECTS OF DESIRE’

Still life exhibition showcases 68 works by 34 artists

BY WESLEY PULKKA
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If you are looking for the bees' knees in local exhibitions, the New Mexico Art League Gallery is hosting "Objects of Desire: The Still Life Show" with 68 works by 34 artists.

The still life genre made its early appearance nearly 2,000 years ago in mosaic floor coverings in Pompei and in some ancient Roman wall paintings a few years later but did not achieve its full flowering until the European Renaissance in the 16th century.

Still life mastery was a requirement in most 19th-century European art academies but was not considered high art fit for ambitious male artists, who were encouraged instead to paint the true lies of mythology as metaphor and the historic fictions written by conquerors.

However, female artists were allowed portraiture and still life as legitimate albeit less important career choices.

In "Objects of Desire," we find a full palette of subjects, styles and media, including photography.

The ghost of Georgia O'Keeffe is present in a few works that include skulls, one of her more notable subjects. As O'Keeffe evolved in modernism, she also rebelled against the still-life-is-OK-for-female-artists role by painting gigantic portraits of flower blossoms.

When a single bloom occupies a 3- by 5-foot canvas, it is no longer a cute little still life subject. Her work was an abstract statement that even big-city curators and collectors could not ignore.

During the 20th century, other artists, including Mary Cassatt, Käthe Kollwitz, Pablo Picasso, Umberto Boccioni, Georges Braque and Giorgio Morandi, hoisted the more tradition-based still life flag.

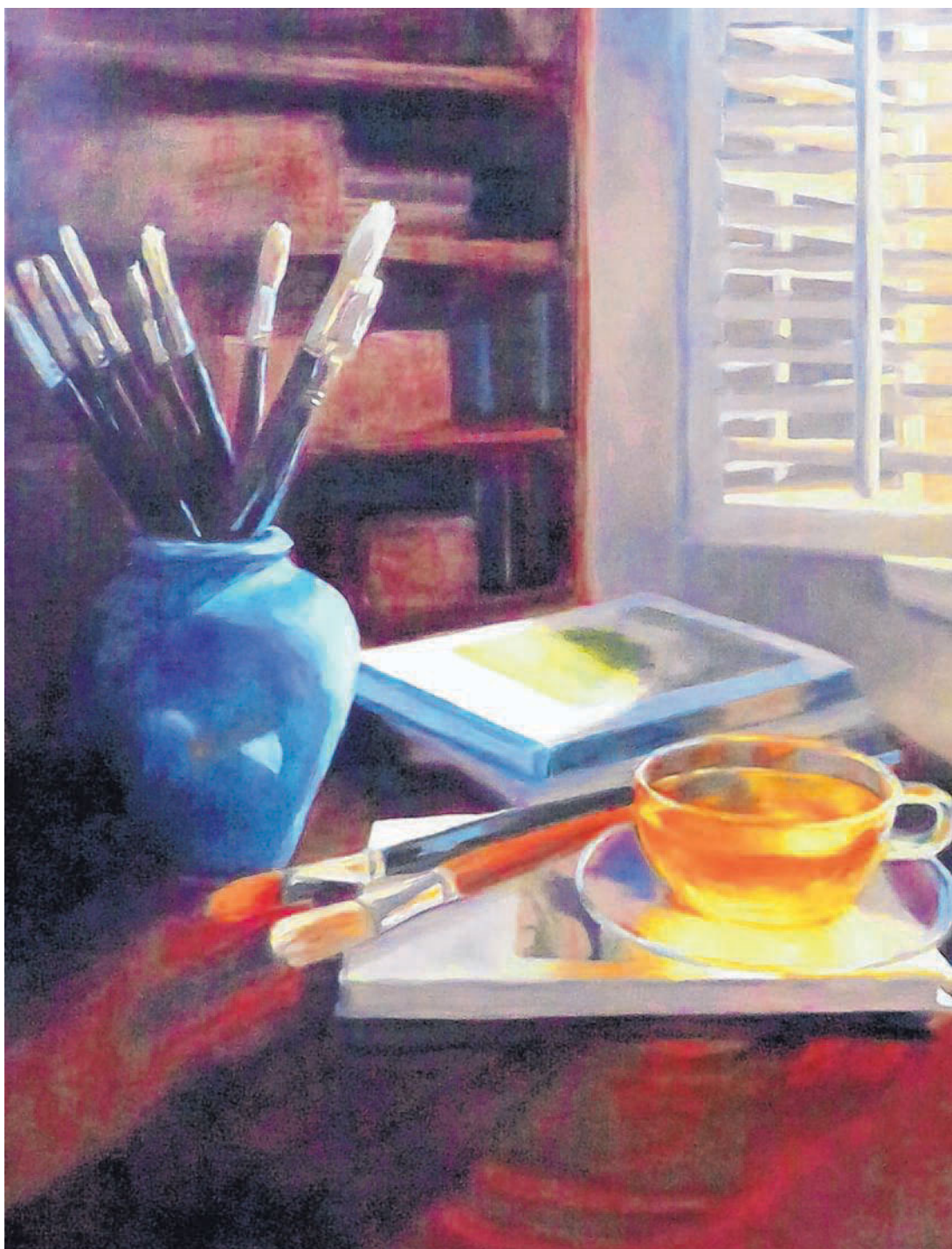
Stunning oils by Sarah Siltala titled "Still Life With Plum" and "Still Life With Eucalyptus" share a tinge of Morandi's stubborn simplicity, especially in the white tablecloths in both paintings.

Siltala's prodigious drawing and painting skills are complemented by a blend of poetry and surrealism in the two quiet masterpieces.

One of Siltala's students, Kate Fry, wades into the fray with "Coffee and Pears," a very credible reflection of and homage to Siltala's style.

Among my favorites in the show is "Morning Tea and Edgar Payne," by Judith Wagner, a drop-dead gorgeous oil on canvas that reveals a mastery of natural light.

A vase of brushes, a few art books, presumably about California artist Edgar Payne (1883-1947) who had a lifelong love affair with the Western landscape, and sunlight bathing a desktop, tell the story of inspirational contemplation at the beginning of the day.



"Morning Tea and Edgar Payne," by Judith Wagner, is an outstanding example of painting natural light while offering viewers a poetic narrative.



"Still Life with Plum," by Sarah Siltala, is a quiet masterpiece in the "Objects of Desire: The Still Life Show" at the New Mexico Art League Gallery.

Wagner's brushwork and handling of morning light is distantly reminiscent of works by East Coast painter and critic Fairfield Porter (1907-1975).

Picasso and Boccioni had a hand in "Cubist Bottle," by Brandon Allebach, who is fascinated with the cubist-futurist synthesis in the early 20th century. He has two more similar paintings in the collection.

Cynthia Rowland is an accomplished impressionist who moves from the more tightly and beautifully painted "A Study in Blues" to "Buffy's Glass," an insouciant rendering of flowers in a glass jar. Both pictures are top-notch.

Valerie Cordora and Brenda Bauer are two artists living in a world where aligned ellipses and perfect perspective do not matter. Cordora's "Margery's

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Objects of Desire: Still Life Show" with 68 works by 34 artists

WHEN: Through April 7. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Call 293-5034.

WHERE: New Mexico Art League Gallery, 3409 Juan Tabo NE, behind the Juan Tabo Public Library

HOW MUCH: Free

"Teacup and the Saltshaker" is one of curator Bethany Nelson's favorite paintings. Though I relate to the energy and free brushwork, the invasive mix of white in almost every color softens the overall impact for me.

Bauer's "Tulips" also is filled with rule-bending character that offers a stark contrast to Annette Wiles' "Blue Vase II" and "Blue Vase," two floral arrangements.

The strength of the show is in the variety of styles, subjects and content that fill both galleries and that work well-worth seeing. My apologies to all of the talented artists not mentioned.