

In the Age of Etsy, Paradise City Arts Festival Still a Draw for Art Lovers, Artists



An abstract sculpture from WB Sculpture Studio greets visitors at the entrance of the Paradise City Arts Festival Saturday at the Three County Fairgrounds in Northampton. Photo - DAN LITTLE

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NORTHAMPTON — While websites like Etsy give art lovers instant access to the works of countless artists, the Paradise City Arts Festival continues to draw hundreds of artists and thousands of patrons to the Three County Fairgrounds twice each year. And patrons, artists and festival volunteers say it's the in-person conversations — and the opportunity to view up close and, in some cases, touch the works — that make the semi-annual festival a unique and invaluable experience for artists and their customers alike.

Paradise City Inc. hosts two festivals a year in Northampton and two in Marlborough. Around 1,000 artists applied to be a part of this fall's event in Northampton, which runs through Monday. Only 260 made the cut after the jury process.

Among them is Deb Kracht, of Palmer, who sells her creations under the ArtHead Studio moniker. Her pieces are colorful, whimsical and definitely unusual - diminutive animals made of old medicated powder boxes, robots crafted from coffee containers and lanky creatures built from old cameras.

"I do 3-D mixed media, mostly recycled, repurposed, and re-thought-out materials," Kracht said on Saturday, the festival's opening day. Jill Lesko, Kracht's wife, said much can be lost when viewing works online compared to seeing them in the flesh. She takes photos for Kracht's website, and acknowledges that pictures don't often do the work justice, because the viewer can't experience the kinesthetic quality of a piece.

"When you flatten it, it changes it," Lesko said of trying to capture the work in an image.

Kracht sells some of her pieces online and says her Web operation and her presence at shows and festivals are complementary in her business model. People who meet her at shows will often buy something from her website, she said. She used to have an Etsy page, but has since taken it down because she said it's hard for people to find a particular artist on the website - even if they know his or her name.

Customer Nancy Hawthorne enthusiastically interjected herself into the Web-vs.-art-show conversation while browsing Kracht's work.

"To visit a website, you need intention," she said. "This, there's much more serendipity involved." Indeed, Hawthorne, of Marblehead, said she came across the Paradise City show by chance. She and a friend were tagging along to western Massachusetts with their significant others, who were playing golf in the area. Not golfers themselves, they figured the festival would be a fun way to spend the day, she said.

Hawthorne said she had never even heard of the festival until deciding to go on Saturday — nor had she ever seen Kracht's work. But she ended up buying one of Kracht's pieces: a dog sitting in a metal box, which she said reminded her of her golden retriever.

"Certain things are just so you, they resonate so much," Hawthorne said.

Appreciate nuances

Westhampton artist David Poppie agreed that one draw of art shows is that they offer viewers the experience of being able to touch, feel and see firsthand the nuances of a piece of art. His works include pencils, sanded-down and laid flat - some inside a frame - and placed in a set of arrays. Some are geometrical and ordered, while others are more free-form.

"I don't care how good I can shoot a photo, you'll never get the tactile-ness of this," he said, pointing to one of his richly textured, vibrantly hued creations. "No matter how well you write, you'll never get across what the piece is."





Visitors passing his booth might stop because one of his pieces caught their eye. From that, a dialogue can begin between the artist and a potential patron in an easier and more organic way than online, he said.

That dialogue provides a “segue” into his work, Poppie said.

Get the narrative

Those types of conversations are a vital part of what makes festivals like Paradise City valuable to the art community in the 21st century, co-director Linda Post said. “When you bring something home from a show like this, it’s really nice if there’s a narrative to it,” she said. “People are really interested in learning about the artists.”

Post has long related those stories to art fans in the festival’s magazine, which has a circulation of 70,000, she said.

But festival-goers wanted even more contact with the artists. So organizers this year introduced “Smart Talks,” a series where artists deliver presentations about the history and inspiration of their work. Going along with this fall’s theme of “eat, drink and be merry,” the talks go beyond what is traditionally thought of as art.

On Monday at noon, Alka Kanoukia, owner of India House, will share stories of her upbringing in India and the food there that inspired the dishes at her Northampton restaurant. She’ll also do a live cooking demonstration to show the audience how one of her family recipes is made.

And at 2 p.m., metal sculptor Vicente Garcia will talk about how his industrial west Texas upbringing influenced the upcycled sculptures he creates.

The Smart Talks — and the one-on-one talks that patrons have with artists — lay an important foundation, Post said. “When a patron meets an artist for the first time, that’s a really important point of contact,” she said. “There’s so many friendships that are made here.”

After seeing an artist’s work in person and meeting them, a customer is often more comfortable going back to that artist to commission a work or buy something online as a gift, she said. And she said it’s common for artists who live out of the area to stay with their longtime customers when they come back to Northampton or Marlborough.

Regional draw

This fall, artists from California, Washington state and Florida came to Northampton to show their wares. Post said despite the amount of interest from artists around the country, they don’t want to increase the number of exhibitors at each event. “The pie is only a certain size of money that’s going to be spent,” she said. An important part of Paradise City’s mission is to help artists thrive and make a living, Post said.

Chris and Jackie Eggleston, who say they live in upstate New York’s “cow country,” come to Paradise City twice a year.

"This is the nicest show outside of New York City," Chris Eggleston said.

Jackie Eggleston, a retired art teacher, said the tactile aspect of picking something out is what draws her and her husband to art shows throughout the region. They had stopped by the booth of glass artist Henry Levine, of Albany, Ohio, to offer some praise. They already own several of his pieces — most recently, a cookie jar bought at a festival in Tarrytown, New York.

"We were just talking about you yesterday - it's really neat that you're here," Jackie Eggleston told him.

Levine doesn't have a website. Because he's "out in the country," he only has dial-up Internet. Even so, he had strong words for the impact the Internet is having on the art world status quo.

"The Internet has ruined the gallery system," he said. People often see the work of an artist at a gallery and, rather than buying a piece at the gallery, will go home and Google the artist's name and purchase a piece online.

The Egglestons, he said, are doing it right. "The best way to choose art is to walk with your significant other, arm-in-arm, down the aisles of a show," he said.

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Images from top to bottom:

Carol and Jean-Pierre Hsu's booth

Festival visitor with Wendilee Heath O'Brien

Kest Schwartzman's booth

Young visitor admiring Josh Simpson's Planets

