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La Jolla Festival of the Arts

Painting 'out in the open' in today's society

Local artists & others featured at La Jolla Festival of the Arts

By Morgan M. Hurley | GSD Assistant Editor

For the 27th year, the La Jolla Festival of the Arts will bring fine art, music, food, wine and craft beers to San Diego's "jewel by the sea." This year's festival, which since 1987 has raised over \$1 million for adaptive sports and recreation programs for San Diegans with disabilities, will return to the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) campus, taking over Warren Field.

Produced by the Torrey Pines Kiwanis Club, the festival will exhibit the work of over 200 artists drawn from throughout the western United States and will include fine art in all its variety; paintings in every medium and modality, photography, jewelry, pottery, sculptures, glass design and more.

Described on its website as "a feast for the eyes, palate and ears," the two-day festival will also include a variety of performance artists, ensembles and solo performers on two different stages.

One local artist who will be featured again this year is Robert Ferguson, an Escondido, Calif.-based "en plein air" landscape artist who also paints nudes. "En plein air" is a French expression that means "in the open air," and artists who use this method take an easel and paint box out into nature and paint their landscape subjects live, out in the open, instead of working from photos in a studio.

The tradition was made popular in the 1800s by Monet and other classic impressionists and is still popular today, though those done on canvases as large as Ferguson's are rare, he said.

Ferguson, a native of San Diego who moved with his family to Las Vegas and Montana during his childhood, later spent many years as a graphic designer and art director in New York City before settling back in Escondido over 20 years ago to focus on his career as a fine artist.

"I wanted to paint outside and I



Robert Ferguson painting "en plein air" (Courtesy Robert Ferguson)

knew that I couldn't do that on the East Coast," he said. He operates out of his own art gallery and studio, located at 1291 Simpson Way in Escondido.

Growing up in "puritanical"

Montana, Ferguson said he wanted to explore painting the human anatomy but there were no organized life-drawing classes or teachings of that nature available to him, so he started with landscapes.

"I really wanted to paint and draw the [human] figure. I felt really guilty about that as a kid. You know, I'm really not supposed to be doing that, painting naked people. That's bad; it's sinful," he said.

After four years of art school in New York, he said he perfected his methods of painting live nudes, both male and female, and added them to his standard repertoire. Once back in Escondido, however, promoting this skill got him in a bit of hot water about five years ago.

"I had a nude in my window at a gallery here and hell broke loose," he said. "It was a male nude and it was full frontal. The mayor came to our studio, it was on CNN, [and people] were picketing the gallery and threatening to throw rocks at the windows.

Calling the incidents "eye-opening," Ferguson said it made him question "where we are mentally" as a society.

"It was shocking and a very traumatic experience for me. I felt violated. I felt misunderstood," he said. "It was so personal."

The incident may have shook him to the core and made him question where this societal fear of the human body came from, but Ferguson said he still paints nudes.

"It's art. It is what artists do," he said.

Adding another twist of irony, he said that although his nude paintings are approximately 80 percent female compared to 20 percent male, this particular aspect of his art has caused people to think he is gay, but he's not.

"I do have a nice gay following for my nudes," he said, "and actually for my landscapes, too."

Though still primarily sought out for his large canvas, en plein air landscapes, after over a decade of painting out in the open, Ferguson said these days he uses a collection of his original open air work to paint reproductions and perfect his craft, and even uses his nudes to work on his color mixing – he only uses three colors – and brush strokes.

The majority of his work – he has created 1,700 paintings to date – is sold in Escondido, Beverly Hills, and La Quinta, Calif., at the annual art festival there each spring. This will be his fifth year at the La Jolla Festival of the Arts. To learn more about Ferguson's work, visit fergusonart.com.

The La Jolla Festival of the Arts runs June 22 and 23 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at UCSD's Warren Field. Organizers are offering free parking and a shuttle service. For more information about the La Jolla Festival of the Arts, visit lajollafestival.org. ▼