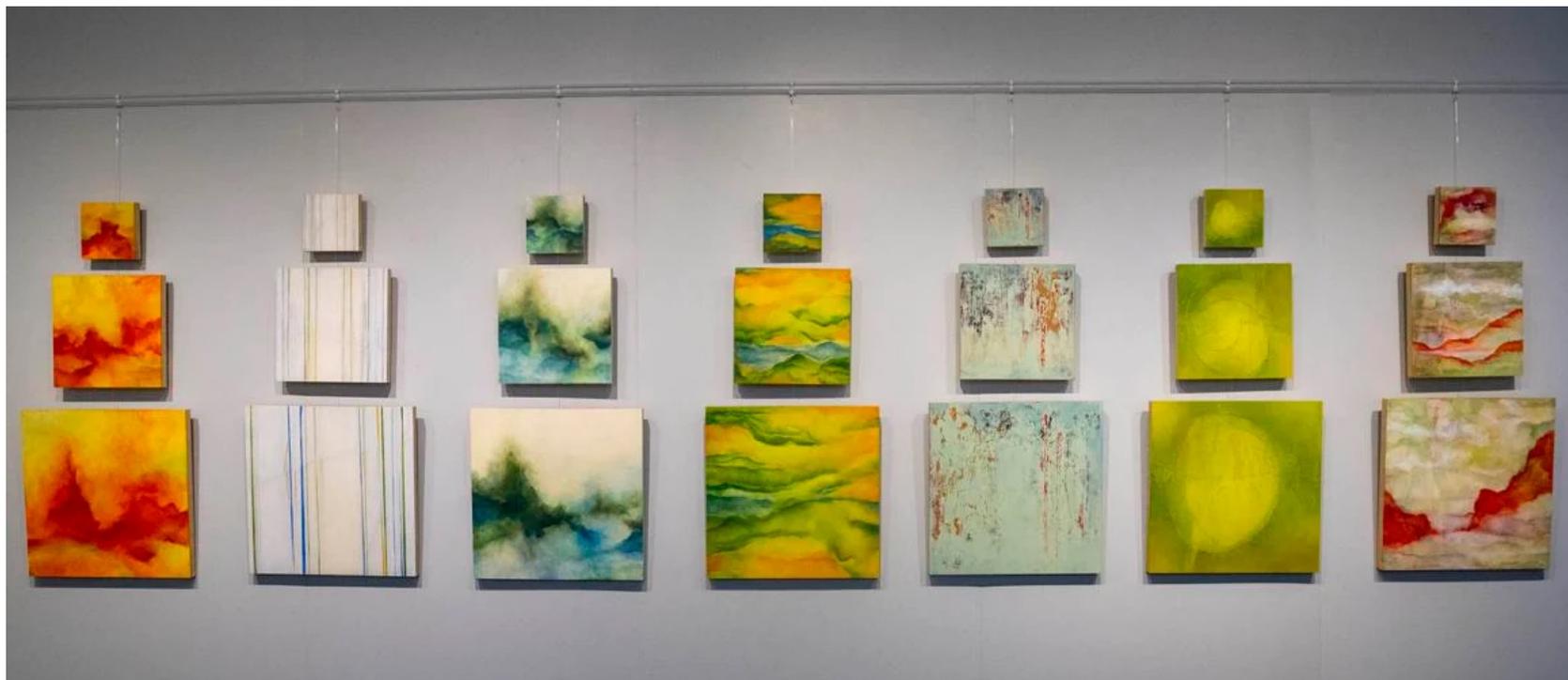


https://www.timesargus.com/features/vermont_arts/visual-art-review-stephanie-kossmann-healing-portraits-from-the-inside/article_5aefc996-83f5-5bf5-8b8b-4a21f32eb220.html

Visual Art Review: Stephanie Kossmann: Healing portraits from the inside

By Mary Gow Arts Correspondent

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Stephanie Kossmann: A collection of works from “Living Space: Portraits through Appreciative Inquiry” at the T.W. Wood Gallery in Montpelier

Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo

Thirty people standing in a room all look different. Abstract portraits of 30 people at the Nuquist Gallery at T.W. Wood Gallery are likewise all unique. Instead of physical characteristics, these abstract portraits consider what is inside their subjects — layers of emotions, stories, dreams — through color, form and imagery.

“Living Space: Portraits through Appreciative Inquiry, Paintings by Stephanie Kossmann” opened in late March at the T.W. Wood Gallery in Montpelier and continues to May 12.

Kossmann’s abstract portraits are interpretations based on each sitter’s responses to an appreciative inquiry — questions inviting them to explore their goals, achievements, concepts of safety and love, and more. Participants are survivors of complex relational trauma and sexual violence. The exhibition includes three paintings of each person presented as a triptych.

T.W. Wood also presents “The Vermont Watercolor Society Members’ Show” in the Hallway Gallery. With still life, portraits, landscapes, the exhibition shows a diversity of techniques and styles of watercolor painting.

“Living Space” is the culmination of three years of work by Kossmann, 2019-22, who lives and has her studio in East Fairfield. Kossmann, a survivor of relational trauma, conceived the series in 2017.

“I wanted to honor and give back to the community that has helped me fully embrace living again. I found understanding and camaraderie, and a lot of support for healing, from others with their own histories of abuse,” Kossmann explained.

Kossmann, who is known for her emotional abstractions, including in seascapes and landscapes and artworks exploring memory and perception, turned to appreciative inquiry as an approach for these portraits.

Appreciative inquiry, she explained, “is a method of shifting perspective and moving creatively towards a desired future by focusing on strengths, qualities, and achievements rather than overcoming deficiencies.”

For the project, she reached out to others who had experienced abuse and neglect.

“Sadly, you don’t need to look far,” she noted.

To develop these abstract portraits, Kossmann did not have conventional sittings with her subjects. She still doesn’t know what most of them look like.

“Their physicality wasn’t what I was trying to convey. I wanted to honor the best in themselves and, hopefully, to help them embrace and implement their capacity to achieve their goals and dreams,” said Kossmann.

She wrote an appreciative inquiry questionnaire for participants to answer in short essay format. Her questions build on each other, beginning from an imaginary or real time when participants feel calm and peaceful. Her prompts include exploring qualities they appreciate in themselves. She asks what word comes to mind as they look to the future.

“It was important for participants to trust that they share only what they want and that they have complete control over what I disclose, if anything, about their responses and identities,” she said.

Kossmann painted her interpretations of their responses in order, as they had responded. Some sets have up to a dozen underpaintings that are barely perceptible in the final painting. She listened to their preferred genres of music as she painted.

She did four paintings of each participant — sized 8-inches by 8-inches to 24-inches by 24-inches — and gave one of each set to the participant. Participants were invited to name their paintings.

Kossmann’s creative approaches are incredibly diverse. Some portraits evoke a sense of landscape, others draw the viewer to interaction of forms. Some burst with brilliant color and energy, others glow. Using a broad range of techniques, Kossmann builds and scrapes surfaces yielding remarkable textures and depth.

For “Portrait of Leah,” Kossmann said, the participant’s focus in her questions “brought to mind tensile strength, so if you think spider webs or cables or things that help catch and hold things like hammocks or nets.”

Kossmann used an etching needle to incise lines in the panel, painted the piece black, then wiped it off to leave the distinct very fine lines. Next layers included colors painted over and between the lines. She finished with layers of wax, giving the piece a supple surface.

In “Fern, Clover, Thorn,” bright yellow patches seem to float on or perhaps open through fields of blue. The dark blue, with white beneath it, may bring to mind nighttime — in an embracing way — or perhaps a blanket.

With their vertical arrangement and dimensions, the triptychs are quite figure-like. The three paintings are a set together but also compelling individually.

“Just like when we’re meeting people, we each tend to key into unique aspects of them. I invite viewers to ‘meet’ the people behind the paintings organically, through the colors and forms and the hints of stories that led to the final image. Look from across the room. Get right up next to them to see the details. Consider textures. Peek at edges. Look from different angles,” said Kossmann.

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T.W. Wood Gallery

The T.W. Wood Gallery presents “Living Space: Portraits through Appreciative Inquiry, the Paintings of Stephanie Kossmann” in the Nuquist Gallery and “The Vermont Watercolor Society Members’ Show” in the Hallway Gallery, through May 12, at the Center for Arts and Learning, 46 Barre St. in Montpelier. Hours are: noon to 4 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, or by appointment; admission is free; call 802-262-6035, or go online to www.twoodgallery.org