

Married to their craft: Couple have their art featured in First Friday exhibit

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When Crescent City's Downtown Divas host an event like their "Live From Downtown: It's First Friday," you never know who you'll meet.

Arrive for the initial fun at 783 Third St., for the live music, food and other vendors ... but wander a couple of blocks away and you'll meet even more of the area's most creative talents.

Each month's featured artist will be on hand at the Gallery of Arts & Culture, 175 H St. Inside during "First Friday," the Gallery - owned by Barbara Burke - a featured artist will be on hand to chat about their works on display and anything else the wandering visitor wants to discuss.

This month and last has featured the art of husband-and-wife duo Marianne Strehler and Daniel T. Desmond. Originally from Torrance, California, they moved to Grants Pass nine years ago and recently purchased a home in Crescent City.

Strehler said she's been drawing since she was a child. She said she does mostly landscapes, or the occasional oceanscape, still life and portrait. She does her works in oil, acrylics and pencil.

A former secretary in the aerospace industry, Strehler up and decided one day to retire and dedicate her efforts to art.

"Colored pencil is actually what I studied at California State University Long Beach, drawing and painting," she said. "I did my master's exhibit in pencil."

“I love oil, but I’m always drawn back to pencil. It’s a more intimate type of medium. You really have to be close up and study (the subject) very carefully,” she said.

Desmond noted that, “We took different routes to get here. Hers was academic, mine was self-taught. So, I’ve had a long learning period.”

He’s been painting with oils for more than 60 years, with 30 years of experience in watercolors and acrylics.

Desmond has had his paintings - mostly landscapes and seascapes - accepted in national and international exhibits; Strehler has won numerous accolades in local exhibitions.

Their move to Grants Pass, where they have their primary art studio, “was missing something,” said Strehler. “Dan does a lot of ocean scenes. But I felt he wasn’t really painting enough. He needed to have the environment, because he does a lot of plein air-type painting.

“And he also just looks at a scene, memorizes it, then goes and paints it.”

Added Strehler, “We both lived near the ocean in Torrance, and we sort of missed that environment in Grants Pass. So we came to visit Crescent City and I liked the town.”

They bought a house here, where they said they now plan to spend at least half their time. “I favor this climate. Not that hot; not that cold, either,” Strehler said.

They quickly discovered a kinship with Crescent City’s art scene. “We found Barbara’s Gallery. She was very congenial,” said Strehler. “We liked the art she displays and she liked ours, and she’s had it on display ever since.”

Daniel and Marianne first met an art exhibit a few years after their adjudicated works put them in the top two of a competition. “She won first and I won second, and I wondered, ‘Who the heck is she?’” Desmond recalled.

“It was years later that we met at an art club’s exhibit. I thought she was gorgeous. We hit it off right away.

“Other women I’d been seeing couldn’t see me wasting my time painting all the time. So we’ve been very compatible in that aspect, for being together for 25 years.”

For her part, Strehler said she was greatly impressed by Desmond’s art. “I looked at your art; it was an abstract, which is difficult to do. I really liked it,” she said.

“Oh, you liked my work, (but) didn’t like me?” he asked playfully.

“Oh, I did. I was amazed,” Strehler said. “I thought, ‘Now who does this excellent work?’

“At this club competition, you have kitchen painters and serious artists and total beginners. So I could tell from the artwork that this was someone who knows art.

“That’s how we met, but we kept seeing more of each other. I was widowed and he was divorced. So we were, in other words, available.” They were married in 1996.

Desmond was the first of the two to display his art during the “First Friday Featured Artist” at the Gallery of Arts & Culture, in July. Strehler said they have a similar event in Grants Pass, in which they’ve been participating for a number of years.

“Without events like First Friday, there would be absolutely no exposure. I think it’s a vital thing to have,” she said.

“First Friday is very interesting, I’ve liked it.” Desmond added. “I always enjoy interfacing with people. Enjoy talking to people about anything, doesn’t have to be about my art.”

Although painting continues to be the main focus in her life, Strehler insists she’s not young anymore, “past 70.” So she imparts her knowledge to the next generation of artists.

“I tell young people the same thing I was told. Painting is a very hard thing to make a living at. You have to devote yourself 24 hours a day to it. Live it and breath it.

“Even then, it doesn’t guarantee success. Don’t have to become a millionaire, can still make a reasonable living as an artist not known all over the world, maybe your town, or state or region. Way to get known is to join various organizations and exhibit.”

Strehler said she doesn’t exhibit as often as she used to. Young artists need to know that exhibiting, applying for exhibits, sending samples, then traveling to shows can be expensive. But it can be a very rewarding experience.

“It’s mostly a personal thing,” she said. “Work every day, try to do what is, in your mind, perfect. Reaching that is rewarding. And when someone appreciates your work enough to buy it, that is especially rewarding.”

What helped her grow as an artist was having a partner to share the journey. “We look at each other’s work. You need feedback on your work. It’s good to have somebody to look at your work and say it needs this or that, and you can agree or disagree,” she said.

“The other nice thing about art is that wherever we go, the first contact in town is through the art world. You find the art association. Are there galleries? Meet the owner. Do they exhibit? Do they like your work?

“It’s a wonderful thing, because it opens doors.”