

Art For Thought

Creative Pinellas' Summer Art Exhibits

By Amanda Hagood

This summer, The Gallery at Creative Pinellas offers two shows reminding us why art isn't just a pleasant retreat from everyday life. It's also a vital way of capturing and reimagining that life.

The *2024 Emerging Artist Exhibition* [May 9-July 21] and *Flora & Fauna* [May 23-July 7] turn the lens on contemporary issues such as the environment and homelessness, as well as on personal experiences such as grief, in works that are both beautiful and resonant.

2024 Emerging Artist Exhibition

The *2024 Emerging Artist Exhibition* features the 10 recipients of this year's Creative Pinellas Emerging Artist grants, including painters, photographers, poets, performers, and installation artists, many of whom work in multiple fields. The grant intends to foster community between outstanding artists as they continue to develop their practice, and so it has, according to 2024 grantee Vanessa Cunto. Creative Pinellas has blogs documenting the artists' processes and experiences.

Transitioning from a career in video production into graphite drawing, Cunto found strength in sharing the journey with her cohort [the eighth group of awardees].

"Not since I've been in school have I had such a great network of people," she said.

Beth Gelman, Senior Director of Arts and Cultural Programming, agreed.

"There's something special about this group," Gelman said. "They have such an amazing inner light."

That incandescence is clear from the moment you walk into the gallery. Works range from the small and subtle, like Cunto's slightly surreal and entirely exquisite drawings. They inspired by the still lifes of the Dutch Masters, to fiery and phantasmagoric, like the video clips of



Creative Pinellas summer art exhibits includes the *2024 Emerging Artist Exhibition*. This exhibition features Luci Westphal's carefully crafted "Public Walls and In-Between Spaces," which explores the issue of homelessness in urban spaces.

fire performer Gaby Rosa's *Mythical Menagerie* show.

Reflecting that flame, Harriet Monzon-Aguirre's expansive oil landscapes of Old Tampa Bay glow with warm red undertones. This highlights the healing she sought in nature as she coped with her mother's illness.

Large installations, such as Luci Westphal's poignant "Public Walls and In-Between Spaces," stretch into the gallery's open space and invite interaction.

Westphal's piece features a plywood structure decked with her photographs of cityscapes and graffitied walls from across the world. Inside, the shelter protects a small camp of quilt, suitcase, and personal possessions – summoning the real people behind public perceptions of homelessness.

Letters also make a significant appearance. On one wall, Tyler Gillispie's poems eloquently speaks to past and contemporary efforts to efface Florida's LGBTQIA+ community. These poems are rendered in bold prints produced by his fellow honoree Kaitlin Crockett. Opposite, a crowd of Crockett's letterpress and risograph bills vibrantly declares "We Do Not Work For The Machine."

The collaborators take the oft-cited power of words to another level. They give them shape and color, leaving, one might say, a powerful impression.

"I love the strong point of view we hear from each of this show's contributors," said Cunto. "There are so many ways for visitors to interact."

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■ **Flora & Fauna**

In the other half of the gallery, an equally captivating spectacle is in bloom.

Flora & Fauna features six artists' views on the natural world. The production for the show came from Creative Pinellas' Beyond Place-making grant program. According to Creative Pinellas, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funds the grant for the artist recipients and nonprofit organizations.

The *Flora & Fauna* collective chose to partner with Florida Botanical Gardens. Edel Alvarez Galban (who paints under the name A Galban) explained how this focuses on outdoor education. The project includes multiple events in the Florida Botanical Gardens, such as a community plein air painting session and creating recycled materials into art.

"We all see life, human beings, nature in general," said Galban, who paints in multiple media while also practicing family medicine. "But we all see it differently."

Galban emphasized that it's the process of seeing that inspires people to care, support, and protect.

Throughout, visitors will find the polychromatic Rorschach-like creatures of Josignacio, who pioneered the use of plastic paint on paper and canvas as part of the New Cuban Art movement of the 1980s. These bold images contrast with Frolián Escobar's ephemeral "Jardines Invisibles" series. Jewel-toned, peacock-like birds wind through a forest of densely interwoven trees, all fading like the last moments of a dream.

Yet another lens on nature comes through Leslie Hiatt's brightly stylized botanical paintings, which impose a lace-like layer of roses across ombre canvases. I was particularly drawn to "Sacred Maui Gardens." This centers a human face among tropical plants, with the delicate tracings of birds hidden throughout.

Among this menagerie of images, A Galban's quirky, cockeyed creatures – including birds, dogs, snails, and even plants – stand out with



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Two of Creative Pinellas' summer art exhibits highlight timely themes and the importance of the arts in our challenging world. Explore pieces in 2024 Emerging Artist Exhibition and *Flora & Fauna* art exhibits.

a rakish charm. His "Animals Picnic" features a peaceable kingdom of creatures sharing a blissed-out feast on a patchwork quilt (suspending their typical predator-prey feeding habits). Galban laughed as he described his process for creating the painting.

"Nature is a place we all share, and we all should take care of," he said, echoing the sense of joyful unity that pervades the image.

He recalled the inspiration for the half dozen colorful birds that line the treetops in the image. When visiting Puerto Rico, he heard the mysterious warbling of feathered foresters. However, he could never quite seem to spot them.

He later learned they weren't birds at all.

"They're actually frogs," Galban said. "There's a native *coquí* frog that sounds just like birds!"

This place where imagination and perception meet the living world is exactly where "Animals Picnic" developed. Galban said "Animals Picnic" is exactly where art can make an intervention into the cause of conservation.

Or as Gelman put it, "this exhibit reminds us to stop and really look

at where we live. The art here celebrates this, and brings our engagement with nature front of mind."

■ **Support the Arts and Artists**

Both exhibits underscore the critical role that art and artists play in keeping our hearts open and our minds attentive to the challenges our world faces today. Creative Pinellas CEO Margaret Murray said this is one reason why local arts agencies work hard not just to promote the arts, but to support artists.

"A key challenge in our field right now is the environment," she said. "Allowing artists to develop and have a high standard of living. That's what everyone is trying to address."

So while you're exploring installations and pondering paintings, don't forget that you're also gazing into that ancient and important mirror-onto-life. Along with the art that challenges our minds and restores our souls. And don't forget to appreciate the artists, too.

Creative Pinellas, 12211 Walsingham Road, Largo. Flora & Fauna: Through July 7. 2024 Emerging Artists Exhibition: Through July 21. 727-582-2172, creativepinellas.org. ♦