

Steve Volpe a master at producing thought provoking paintings

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

Local artist, Steve Volpe has been nominated a finalist for the Salt Spring National Art Prize for his intriguing painting, Winter Gathering. This shows a glass case with taxidermy birds on perches, all looking in the same direction. There is a yellow police crime scene tape around the case and a woman in a coat is leaving, as though she is in a hurry, her back to the viewer.

"I have been member of Headwater Arts," Steve Volpe told the Citizen. "I had studio space at the Alton Mill in 2010 and had my paintings at the juried shows at at the SGI."

He gave us some details about the Salt Springs awards: "My painting has been nominated for the art prize. Anyway, they had something like 1,200 artists submitting some 1,900 pieces and they had to whittle that down to 52. I was quite thrilled to be accepted. It's a high quality show, a national show.

"Mine is Winter Gathering: we're not sure what she's looking at; we're not sure of the nature of the crime. My paintings are often allegorical but there's still stories and unfinished stories that you have to complete," leaving the viewer with the task of interpretation.

"When I'm creating a painting," he continued, "I ask a series of questions. The answers to those questions shape the final imagine ? what needs to be revealed or hidden; how will the body language play a part; where is it taking place; what time of day is it?"

His questions were also, "Has something just happened? Is something about to happen?"

"I try to make paintings that operate on more than one level: the face value narrative but there's the allegorical element. I try to leave them open ended but I try to point the view we're looking in a direction."

Enlarging his theories, "This is a theme that has cropped up in my recent work, that of nostalgia. Where I was painting songs birds out of a youthful naive enthusiasm, now I'm just trying to present the subject in a way more relevant to the times and to me personally. There's a mood of loss in the painting but my work doesn't have an ecological bent."

"What's the crime?" one might ask of Winter Gathering.

His comments: "It's not what I'm about when I'm making that painting, not answering the question. I'm thinking about making an interesting painting for the viewer. I prefer to leave that to the viewer. Ecologically, for me, there's a sense of loss; it's almost like trying to recover. I'm always hoping the viewer will pull their ideas out of the painting based on the information I've given them."

In his collection is an oddity: "I did a painting of [Dave] Keon on the front of a magazine. There's a picture of me holding the cover, in a winter scene. It was meant to be like a hostage taking. That was a metaphor of how you can be a slave to your past." He said, "I always think I know what I want to do when I start a painting but it often goes off in its own directions. I may know what I want to put in the picture but the painting - on a design level - won't allow it."

Mr. Volpe did a Fine Arts degree from Queens University, graduating in 1989.

"I was always drawing ? there is evidence of a talent there from a pretty early age."

He went on to "Teachers college, then I taught briefly until I went to Sheridan for computer graphic design.

"I was a freelance graphic designer for 13 years, primarily for one company. During that time I painted very sporadically. It was a

creative outlet from pamphlets, website design, all that kind of stuff.?

Change came at last, when, ?In 2008, they were downsizing. I wanted to get back into painting again and I've been doing that ever since, on a full time basis.?

Happy days and with fine results, as Mr. Volpe commented, ?The accolades are certainly there and everything seems to be going along.?

While some of his paintings, on reflection, are almost frightening, Mr. Volpe insists, ?I don't see my paintings as dark ? I see them as thought provoking. There's a bit of a balancing act there. So, if the painting is nostalgic, I might add a bit of darkness there to change it. So it can be a double edged sword. I didn't want to just do a painting of Dave Keon ? I find it more interesting to paint my fascination with Keon.?

He admitted, ?I find it more interesting to do a painting about the psychology of it ? more intense than dark.?

A visitor to Steve Volpe's website, www.stevevolpe.ca could view the recent collection, dominated by this interesting take on story telling with his paintings, by looking at the '2012 to current' heading. On that panel, is Beach Game: a man is laying on the beach in his swimming trunks. Although he is wearing his glasses, his eyes appear to be closed.

?It's a sunny day, there's a yellow balloon in one hand but he has a gun in his other hand.?

He went on, ?I take a lot of pictures of people. A lot of time, a gesture or facial expression will trigger an idea. Take a gesture, sometimes there's a dream element.?

Mr. Volpe sells his paintings through Ingram Gallery in Toronto and Earls Court Gallery in Hamilton.

Explaining overall, he said, ?I try to create a lot of eye movement in the work. It's not a static experience looking at my paintings, I don't think.?