

Iconic ART

At Vaca gallery,
Hartman's religious
pieces evoke the past
and present

By Richard Bammer
Features Writer

The stars of the show are no bigger than 1 foot square, but they pack a considerable visual punch.

Vacaville artist Theresa Hartman's three religious icons, with their haloed images and dominating gold backgrounds, are fashioned somewhat after small Russian and Greek Orthodox icons seen in museums and art books.

Done in the old-timey medium of egg tempera, pigment mixed with egg emulsion, they are more than merely eye-catching, striking and noteworthy examples of sophisticated artistic skill.

Painted on wood, they embody the essence of the new exhibit at the Vacaville Art League & Gallery, "The Spiritual & The Sublime," through December at the 718 E. Monte Vista Ave. space.

The 31 pieces in the show, organized by gallery manager Lori Hartley, celebrate the idea of being aware, of mediating between body and soul, the spiritual, and that which impresses us with a sense of grandeur and power, the sublime.

THE SPIRITUAL & THE SUBLIME

Through December
Vacaville Art League
& Gallery
718 E. Monte Vista Ave.
Vacaville

Noon to 4 p.m.,
Tuesday to Saturday

Free

448-8712

www.vacavilleartgallery.com



Joel Rosenbaum/The Reporter

Theresa Hartman used egg tempera for her three religious icons at the Vacaville Art Gallery.

Some of the art does a better job than others, but Hartman's works are clearly in a class by themselves. Hers plumb depths of the exhibit's theme beyond mere surface foam, as her portraits of religious images rush forward out of the past, figuratively speaking, and into human consciousness in 2005.

"St. Dominic de Guzman," at 10 by 11 1/2 inches in a glass-covered, recessed "shadow box," depicts the profile of a priest in a traditional brown frock. A halo, with an eight-pointed star at its apex, encircles his head. He holds a vellum book in his right hand, a stalk with three white lilies in his left. Below him are five flowering white lilies. Using black pigment, she

Painted filigreed, latticed lines around the wood block's edges and added the name "St. Dominicus" at the bottom.

Curiously, to the left of the painting, Hartman, a Roman Catholic from Minnesota, has attached a silver crucifix with enameled red beads. It distracts from — more than it contributes to — the work's intended spiritually lofty effect.

"The holy spirit is the true creator of all icons," Hartman said Monday in a telephone interview. "We're nothing but someone holding a brush. The icon chooses you — you don't choose the icon."

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Her portrait of "St. Nicholas" — the legendary Santa Claus and the patron saint of Russia, Greece and children — gives him a bulbous forehead, receding gray hair but a full, salt-and-pepper beard denoted by firm strokes in white and black. A large, ocher-red halo circles his head and his name is broken up on either side of his neck, the letters ST. NIC on one side, HOLAS on the other. To accent his eyes, Hartman, a graduate in art from Solano Community College, used a pale shade of green, instead of a flesh tone, on either side of his nose.

This icon is not for sale, unlike most of the pieces in the show. Hartman, 62, has promised it to a fundraiser for St. Dominic's Catholic School in Benicia, where her granddaughter attends.

As with many traditional and historical icons, Hartman's "Guardian Angel" comes with darkly cast skin tones.

"The dark (flesh) has to be dark or the light won't show," she noted. "The light comes from the darkness."

The angel, complete with white wings peeking over its back, cradles a swaddled, haloed infant in its left arm. It wears an aqua-green cloth draped over one shoulder and a pink dress that is gathered with a white belt tied in a knot around the waist. A double-crossed staff with a third cross tilted below the double cross angles across the angel's form from right to left.

To see Hartman's paintings side by side is to ponder the historical purpose of icons. For centuries, they have been objects of adoration in and of themselves and considered holy.

"They're nothing more than dirt, egg and wood," she said.

Still, they can give a viewer pause, because to see even modern-day versions of an age-old art tradition is to reach back not only into

history but, perhaps, into our innermost selves.

Vacaville physician Barry Orvell shows off "Reverence, After Botticelli," a 15 1/2-by-18 1/2-inch acrylic, his imagined Venus with downwardly cast eyes, curly blond locks trailing down her right shoulder against a blue-black background.

Sacramento artist Ken Potter contributed "The Spring II," a 30-by-22 giclee print of rapidly pedaling cyclists that owes its dynamism to the Italian futurists, who, in the early 20th century, often depicted speed, violence and warfare. It's a hurtling splatter of yellow, blue and orange.

Janet Manalo's "Sky Ribbon" is photo textile, or, more accurately, a series of six 4-by-8-inch photos of area sunsets and sunrises transferred onto fabric that is bordered, top and bottom, by a 1-inch black border. The piece, which spreads across nearly 4 feet, moves with the grace of a trigonometric sine wave.

But is it craft or art?

"It's always a discussion that goes on in a gallery" setting, Manalo said during a telephone call. "The question is constantly debated" and is, philosophically, an artistic gray area, she added.

A crafted item, she noted, tends to have a pre-made element of some sort.

Fairfield photographer Pam Adams Frey submitted three large-format, black-and-white photos of marble angels from European cemeteries. Their tonal quality bordering on sepia, they are titled "Peace Be Still," "Defense" and "Flower Girl."

Gallery manager Hartley, who earned a fine arts degree from Northern Arizona University, said gallery members want to exhibit "something spiritual" during the December holidays.

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