



## Capital City Arts Initiative

*The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Visual Oasis: Works from Creative Growth, an exhibition by Creative Growth Art Center artists, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from June 1 – September 27, 2018. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artists, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writers, Andreana Donahue and Tim Ortiz, who provided the following essay.*

### SHIFTING PARADIGMS



Creative Growth Art Center studio, partial view, 2018

*Visual Oasis* brings together a diverse selection of works by disabled artists from Creative Growth's studio, employing various approaches to drawing, painting, and fiber art at CCAI's Courthouse Gallery. This group exhibition features Jo Beal, Marion Bolton, Kerry Damianakes, Joseph Fagnani, Susan Glikbarg, Cedric Johnson, Franna Lusson, Donald Mitchell, John Martin, Miguel Palacios, Tony Pedemonte, Ruth Stafford, Christine Szeto, Julie Swartout, Merritt Wallace, and Ed Walters.

Founded in 1974, Creative Growth Art Center was one of the first progressive art studios and has undeniably been the most influential in this movement, providing robust support for the advancement of their artists' careers, achieving inclusion in exhibitions,

collections, and conversations of the broader art community. Their advocacy efforts have been groundbreaking in activating social change, most significantly with Judith Scott's exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, Brooklyn Museum, National Gallery of Art, and Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, among many others.

Creative Growth was initiated for the purpose of providing studio space, time, high quality art materials, and facilitation, offering developmentally disabled artists the resources and freedom to pursue creative endeavors of their own devising. Located in a converted automobile sales showroom, over 160 artists in the Oakland area attend Creative Growth weekly; the result is a particularly productive and inspiring open studio setting with an abundance of natural light and creative activity. An impressive staff of professional artists provide personalized facilitation with tools and materials, while in-house workshops introducing new media are also available for artists interested in expanding their studio practices.

Since the 1970s, artists creating work in progressive art studios have been contributing to and influencing the global contemporary art conversation. Over the past four decades, this studio concept has emerged in communities across the country, producing a continued wealth of highly original ideas, aesthetics, and idiosyncratic bodies of work. It has only been in recent years, however, that their artists have been represented by prominent galleries and permanent museum collections (such as a recent Dan Miller acquisition by MoMA), reflecting a gradual ideological shift toward an increasingly pluralistic contemporary art world.

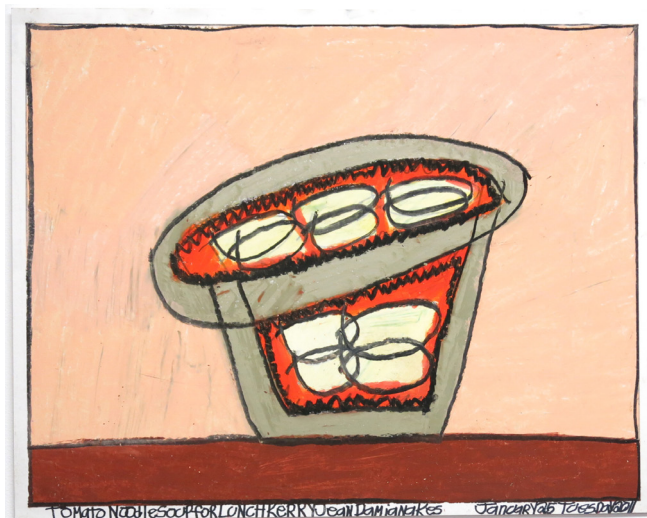
The progressive art studio is a simple concept with a foundation in profound philosophical principles, a paragon in the ambition of creating an inclusive community. The things that we desire, the objects we

revere or consider to be aesthetically pleasing, achieve their status in our culture because of the stories told about them by artists. Creative Growth offers a position of the highest influence and autonomy, the role of an artist, to individuals whose identity has usually been defined otherwise by a perceived inability to contribute. This creates the possibility for voices of marginalized artists to be amplified and, just as importantly, produces an equalizing influence on the art world. The studio becomes a creative institution that radically defies expectations, transcends boundaries, and eliminates prejudices that may typically be prevalent.

Perhaps the easiest way for the art community to initially understand the striking singularity of these prolific artists was to identify their work as an aspect of the Outsider Art genre. Although still often associated with this categorization, the progressive art studio movement directly contradicts the romantic notion of self-taught artists creating entirely in isolation. The influence of art history, the contemporary art discourse, and their contemporaries on Creative Growth's artists is not absent. Furthermore, their works are not defined by any narrow aesthetic or conceptual parameters.

Consequently, *Visual Oasis* becomes a survey of works by sixteen contemporary artists representing

a wide range of backgrounds, demographics (from ages 35 to 82), and distinct bodies of work. This exhibition spans divergent engagements of abstraction and representation - works informed by observation and memory like the vibrant drawings of Kerry Damianakes and Marion Bolton or Franna Lusson's ethereal mixed media portrait, alongside others informed by discovery and repetitive, densely layered mark-making by Joseph Fagnani, Tony Pedemonte, Ruth Stafford, or Miguel Palacios.



Kerry Damianakes, *Tomato Noodle Soup for Lunch*, pastel on paper, 19"x 24", 2011

Kerry Damianakes' pastel recreations of found culinary imagery prove to be still lifes as compelling realizations of desire, indulgence, and comfort. A series defined by playful perspective, aerial or side views of favorite meals are accompanied by detailed text descriptions in the margins - "Chocolate Cake Vanilla Frosting for Dessert" or "Tomato Noodle

Soup for Lunch" - and always document the date completed. Curiously, the history of Damianakes' drawing process is often left visible - a black horizon line bisecting conjoined eggplants or the sides of a soup bowl conspicuous through its tilted lip.

Much like those of Damianakes, Marion Bolton's bright, velvety pastel and colored pencil drawings distill natural forms observed in source photos. At times just verging on abstraction, bold outlines highlight essential elements of his subject matter, delineating individual leaves among the foliage or feathers within a bird's plumage.

Joseph Fagnani's untitled mixed media work exists in a subtle space between entropy and information; fragments of ideas dissolve just as they are about to coalesce on the paper. Fagnani's intuitive accumulation of gestural graphite marks, thick white brushstrokes,



Joseph Fagnani, *untitled*, mixed media, 19.5"x 27.5", 2014



Tony Pedemonte, *untitled*, thread on wood, 7"x13"x7", 2018

Growth predecessor Judith Scott, their work is clearly reminiscent of her yarn-wrapped found object constructions. Scott's influence is also evident in the work of many contemporary fiber artists, such as Sheila Hicks, who began making strikingly similar wrapped objects well after Scott became established internationally.

The relationships revealed across artworks in the exhibition, notably the similarities between Pedemonte and Beal or John Martin and Donald Mitchell, reflect Creative Growth's communal studio environment. While most artists come to the studio with established visions and styles, creative processes are often in dialogue with one another, and at times impactful conversations between artists and staff facilitators arise as peers.

John Martin's shaped wood power saw cutout is representative of an ongoing recent series of work, culminating as exaggerated depictions of everyday objects in sharpie and broadly applied acrylic. Working from both memory and observation, he finds inspiration from an affinity for tools, pick-up trucks, figures, and animals. Martin also collects discarded possessions he acquires on Oakland streets, often storing, studying, and recreating them in his studio.

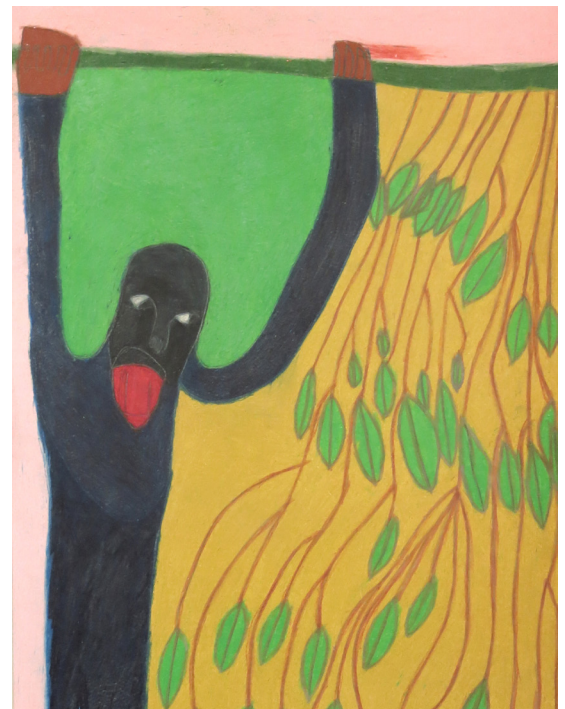
Paintings on narrow, vertical scraps of wood are included by Donald Mitchell, atypical of his usual monochromatic drawing oeuvre. Known for claustrophobic crowds of figures populating the entire surface of the paper, fragments of Mitchell's characteristic black ink figures are still somewhat visible here through bright, multi-colored layers of acrylic.

Textile works by Jo Beal, Susan Glikberg, Cedric Johnson, Tony Pedemonte, Julie Swartout, Christine Szeto, and

and blue painter's tape resides in the intangible realm between concept and chaos - his experience within the enigmatic process of abstraction through the application of expressive line, in an attempt to resolve a painter's personal ambitions.

Merritt Wallace's intricate, narrative drawings of diagrams and architectural maps explore the surface of the paper as a vehicle for invention and storytelling, while conversely those by Tony Pedemonte are exercises in drawing and painting as an automatic process, obliterating both the medium and substrate with an accretion of hard, repetitive marks.

The energy of Pedemonte's older works on paper provide important context for interpreting his sculpture, which replace the repetitively drawn and painted line with thread, ultimately obscuring the form of an interior, unknown wooden object. Despite Pedemonte and Jo Beal not knowing Creative



Marion Bolton, *pastel on paper, 15"x22"*, 2013

