

# Sooke Fine Arts Show welcomes discomfort

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Adrian Chamberlain / Times Colonist

JULY 27, 2017 06:00 AM

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John Grey-Noble with his paintings Nothing to the Table, left, and Kartoffelkopf Betrachen Kunstwerk, behind him.  
Photograph By SOOKE FINE ARTS SHOW

## EXHIBITION

**What:** Sooke Fine Arts Show

**Where:** Seaparc Leisure Complex, 2168 Phillips Rd.

**When:** Preview tonight, runs July 28 to Aug. 7

**Tickets:** \$30 for preview night, regular admission is \$10 adults, \$8 youth/seniors, free for children 12 and under. Passes are \$20

Is this the year the Sooke Fine Arts Show gets political?

The exhibition, opening in preview today, includes a painting satirizing Da Vinci's The Last Supper, with Donald Trump's face attached to the body of Jesus and all his apostles.

There's also a bloody mermaid sculpture intended as a slap against oppressive political ideologies. And there's another sculpture showing Einstein lassoing Earth, which, the artist says, is a comment on the proliferation of nuclear arms.

About eight pieces in the exhibition are “clearly social commentary,” says Christa Rossner, the show’s executive director.

It’s a small percentage, given that 375 works are on display in the juried show. But it is significant. After all, the Sooke Fine Arts Show is a community art show on a West Coast island, not the Tate Modern.

“It seems [the artists] are getting more comfortable with expressing themselves with uncomfortable subject matter. And we welcome it,” Rossner said.

In past years, the Sooke Fine Arts Show has not only accepted politically edgy artworks, it has rewarded their creators with the Jan Johnson Award for Social Commentary. Last year’s winner was Louise Huneck for *In the Name of the Father*, a series of sculptures based on photographs showing the faces of battered women.

Exhibiting artists hail from Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. There are paintings, prints, sculptures, ceramics, fibre art, jewelry, glasswork and photography. The show is one of Vancouver Island’s most popular visual-art events, attracting 8,000 visitors annually.

As one might expect, much of the art, created by both professional and amateur artists, is suitable for hanging above the mantelpiece. Bucolic West Coast landscapes are a favourite subject.

And then there’s the renegade art — works that shrug off prettiness in favour of acerbic social commentary.

John Grey-Noble, a graduate of Alberta College of Art, is the Sooke painter who created *The Last Supper* parody, titled *Nothing to the Table*. Grey-Noble, 64, who was badly disappointed when Trump was elected president, says the assemblage of Trump heads with different expressions is inspired by the American leader’s penchant for pulling faces. The painting also references Trump’s habit of self-contradiction.

“He always seems to be arguing, even with himself,” Grey-Noble says. “And he’s bringing nothing to the table.”

*Nothing to the Table* isn’t the only Trump satire Grey-Noble has entered in the show. There’s another painting, *Kartoffelkopf Betrachen Kunstwerk*, which, Grey-Noble says, can be roughly translated as *Potato-head Contemplates Artwork*.

It shows a back view of Trump. He gazes at Melania Trump, who is wearing a brassiere. The design of her armband and a poster behind her are reminiscent of the Nazi flag. On the right is Ivanka Trump, posed in front of a similar flag. In the foreground, a sign says: “All lies matter.”

In the painting, Trump is trying to “confront the right-wing nature of his behaviour and the reason for it,” Grey-Noble says. “Part of [the intention behind the painting is] that smack in the face, to get people to have a discussion.”

Although he has done plenty of West Coast landscape paintings over the years, Grey-Noble says his work has become increasingly political in the past two years.

Last season, the Sooke Fine Arts Show accepted his canvas *Descent from Pop Culture*. It shows a prone Gumby being carried down from a crucifix. The painting is a parody of the 15th-century work *The Descent from the Cross* by Rogier van der Weyden.

Grey-Noble has exhibited in 10 Sooke Fine Arts exhibitions. In the past, he fretted over subject matter, even looking up the juries, trying to anticipate their tastes.

“Really now, I just paint them for myself,” he said.

Victoria’s Steve Milroy is a 61-year-old artist who created *Atomic Age*, a small sculpture portraying Einstein perched on a teeter-totter while tugging at a lassoed globe. It’s made from such materials as steel, epoxy and Bondo filler.

Like Grey-Noble, Milroy recently decided to shrug off commercial considerations when it comes to art-making and do as he pleases. For 31 years, he was an artist-for-hire, painting murals and signs, decorating cars and motorbikes, creating fibreglass sculptures for swimming pools.

Milroy hung up his commercial-artist shingle not long ago. “I haven’t had a paycheque in about five months. It’s tough,” he says.

He has previously won honours at the Sooke Fine Arts Show. Last year, Milroy submitted a painting depicting a collection of dog heads. Viewed from a distance, the heads form the shape of one large dog. A clever work, it took the Children’s Choice Award two years ago.

Milroy views himself as a people’s artist rather than “a hoity-toity, airy-fairy artist.” On the side, he’s a car buff. In his garage sits a 1937 Chevy he souped up himself. He also created a distinctive Chevy Nova race car with a giant rat logo. “I built the car known as the King Rat. A lot of people know that car. It’s a legend,” he says.

While it’s not political art, Milroy’s most outlandish creation is likely his house. He took an ordinary rancher and, using cement, sculpted it into a tree-like creation with an imposing 18-foot trunk. The building is inspired by such tales as *The Hobbit* and *Hansel and Gretel*.

“My stuff is for the people. I don’t do these funky sculptures where you have to be a UVic grad to interpret it. I try to do stuff that Joe Public will enjoy,” Milroy said.

The bloody mermaid sculpture is by Huneck, the same artist who created the award-winning *In the Name of the Father*. Titled *Taming Temptation*, the clay work depicts a merman performing a grisly operation on a mermaid who is lying on her back.

Taming Temptation takes aim at several things, Huneck says. It's a comment on the "physically awful" things many people do today in the name of beauty, such as branding or cosmetic surgery. As well, the sculpture is a symbol of the damage caused by inflecting oppressive ideologies on the innocent. "And I wanted to do something where the mermaids were scary," she said. "I wanted to get back at [Disney's] Ariel thing."

Like Grey-Noble and Milroy, 59-year-old Huneck says she's reached an age at which creating what she's interested in takes precedence over whether it will sell. A full-time art teacher at St. Margaret's School, Huneck has lectured her students on the "importance of art as commentary."

By creating works such as Taming Temptation, she's practising what she preaches.

"That's where art comes in. I can be very powerful, very impactful. It's just like, wham, here it is. You can garner attention and say a lot really, really quickly," Huneck says.

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