

THREE RIVERS
ARTISTS SHOWCASE
2010 STUDIO TOUR MARKS
9TH BIENNIAL OUTING



TEXT BY AARON COLLINS

Springtime on even-numbered years finds the biennial Three Rivers Studio Tour on the Central California arts calendar. The event's ninth incarnation wrapped up recently and featured a broad cross section of that longtime arts-oriented village's many and varied visual arts talents.

Since the first half of the 20th century, Three Rivers has attracted a variety of artists and artisans due in part to its magnificent setting, and perhaps owing also to the ample presence of fellow artists, as well. In the unincorporated hamlet that sits at the entrance to Sequoia National Park, artists share the Kaweah River canyon with a variety of unlikely fellow citizens, from descendants of the townsfolk from Three Rivers' days as a cattle town, to its more recent outdoors, hippie and alternative crowd, to its social and religious conservatives who don't pay much heed to the arts element. This renders the locale among the more colorful mixes in the region, its fairly homogenous ethnicity notwithstanding.

Studio Tour immerses attendees in a weekend-long event where visitors find a whirlwind of multiple genres and mediums of a scale that requires a little pacing to avoid art overload. Occasionally art lovers might find themselves flagging after a day or two of art-going to the studios, which numbered 21 this recent go-around. So the opportunity arises here to focus more in depth and examine a cross section of the disparate and notable artists whose output from the past two years factored in the event.

JAMES ENTZ

Porterville College associate professor of art James Entz is a longtime fixture on the Studio Tour. The Otis College of Art and Design graduate has exhibited beyond the local arena including at Fresno Fig Tree Gallery and elsewhere.

Entz's work occupies the region between painting and sculpture – both at the same time. He explores the theme of water in a water-based medium, painting what becomes a very solid form upon completion. About the recent work, Entz says it's also suitable as a metaphor for the most valued aspect of his studio practice, “the creative flow – those moments of working transcendence” as he puts it. His chosen theme also reflects concern about the increasingly scarce resource and commodity that vexes California politics. “We are running our rivers dry here in the West,” Entz notes, not the least problem when Three Rivers residents block and divert the three rivers that comprise it. But his concerns are not strictly local. “We import water as the fuel for population and economic growth, and mine our groundwater as we did oil in the last century, at an unsustainable rate.”

The work's lacerations and exposures also nearly read as geological meditations, the results of water's millennia-long effects upon the natural world. →



ABOVE: *Stiff Upper Lip* (acrylic on wood; 2009) by James Entz, whose working venue was featured on the recent Three Rivers Studio Tour 9. In his art, Entz creates works that are both abstract painting and sculpture.

RIGHT: *Deep in the Heart* (acrylic on wood; 2007) by Three Rivers artist James Entz, a recurring participant in the biennial event. Entz is an art instructor at Porterville College.

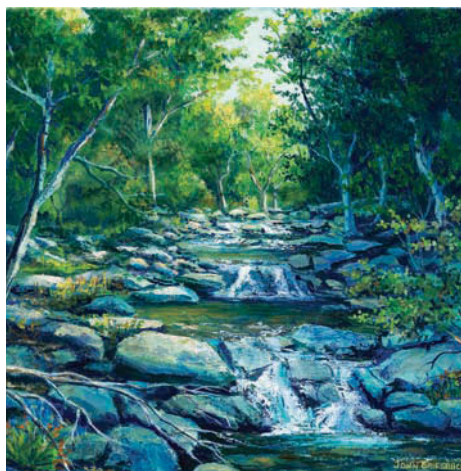
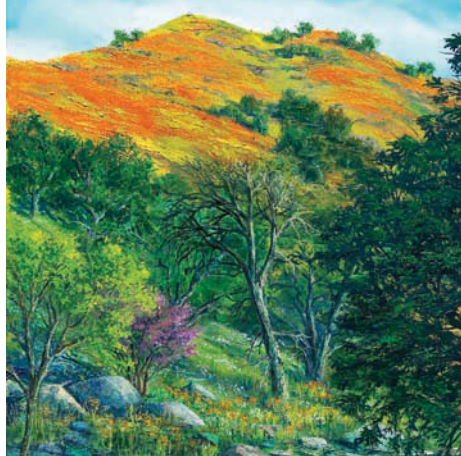
BELOW: *Yellow My Love*, by Three Rivers Artist Aranga Firstman, who was featured among 21 local artist of Three Rivers Studio Tour 9 (acrylic and oil stick on canvas; 2006).

BOTTOM: *See What You See* (acrylic on canvas) by Aranga Firstman, whose venue returned to the ninth biennial Three Rivers Studio Tour this spring. Firstman is a former Science professor at College of the Sequoias.

ARANGA FIRSTMAN

Longtime COS biology professor Aranga Firstman may have retired, but her avocation has kept her plenty busy in the intervening period. Having shown in various Tulare County venues in recent years, Firstman’s work embodies styles and themes that might be considered somewhat unlikely for one steeped in the sciences (Firstman holds undergraduate and masters degrees in biological sciences from Cal Poly-Pomona).

Adept at web design and poetry among other mediums, Firstman’s fine art reflects an interest in alternative spirituality from archetypes to chakras, Reiki, and the Universe in general. In particular, her work recalls the output of another alternative universe: 20th Century women artists whose many accomplishments were largely downplayed, occasionally even written out of art history’s picture. Firstman’s work recalls notable second generation abstractionists like Helen Frankenthaler and Lynda Benglis, artists with whom Firstman would keep fine company. In her art, the rigors of science are supplanted with the demand for a fluid and free-spirited hand. Perhaps one most notable strength of the work is that it often walks an uneasy line between pure abstraction and representational art, often refusing to succumb to the conventional expectations of either.



FATHER JOHN GRIESBACH

A newcomer to the Studio Tour, Griesbach (“Father John” as he’s more commonly known around Three Rivers) is no newcomer to landscape painting. He has balanced practicing the craft with his work as a priest for over two decades, following an urge that began in his early 40s. “I am a padre first and an artist second, so priority goes to my work and ministry, but with a little foresight and planning, many things can be accomplished,” says the man from St Anthony’s Retreat Center.

“I feel privileged to live and work in Three Rivers. It has been one of my favorite places since my childhood, and the fact that my priestly work and ministry would one day bring me back to the very place of my joy and delight as a youth seems to have the hand of God written all over it.”

Having the public traipse into an artist’s inner sanctum can have its perils, as well as exposing a private space that one might best like to keep private. “I was tickled when Elsay Cort, our tour organizer, saw my studio and commented, ‘I’m glad you didn’t clean up your studio because people like to see a real working space like this.’ I didn’t tell her that I *had* cleaned it up so people could at least navigate the area without risk to life and limb,” he notes with humor. →

ABOVE TOP: St. Anthony’s Retreat’s Father John Griesbach displayed his landscape painting avocation for his first time in Three Rivers Studio Tour 9. *California Gold* (oil on canvas; 2009) depicts a bloom of poppies along Dry Creek near the small town of Badger in the Sierra foothills.

ABOVE: *South Fork Shadows* (oil on canvas; 2009, by Fr. John Griesbach) was on view in his studio and inner sanctum for Three Rivers Studio Tour 9.



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TINA ST. JOHN

Perhaps one important distinguishing characteristic of the Studio Tour is its comfort in mixing fine art and craft, two genres that are often considered at odds with one another in the art world proper. The Studio Tour makes no such distinction and offers something for everybody. Tina St. John is among the most prominent of the artisans, a jewelry maker whose talents span the range from reconfiguring vintage jewelry to crafting from scratch her own metal work for original pieces using fine and sterling silver, gold-filled (18kt overlay), Swarovski crystal, semi-precious stones and freshwater pearls.

Other exhibiting artists and artisans included Rick Badgley, Anne Birkholz, Jana Botkin, Carole Clum, Elsay Cort, Nikki Crain, Anne Haxton, Nancy Jonnum, Shirley Keller, Eddie McArthur, Wendy McKellar, Judy Miller, Armin Pfadisch, Marn Reich, George Smith, and Martha Widmann.

“I am always working on the next Studio Tour when the present one is happening,” says event organizer Elsay Cort, who started the event in 1994. What keeps her going, nearly 20 years into the tours? It’s a big undertaking to coordinate arts events on this scale. “This is a big question,” Cort muses. “I highly value art, or what I call ‘the creative life.’ The Studio Tour is a unique way to share this important aspect of the human spirit.” Cort also sees value in the many conversations that start up “that are rewarding for both visitor and artist.”

Until Studio Tour 10 hits in 2012, the artists will be back in their studios for a fresh go at mining the depths of human imagination. What is now only gestating will hatch out two springs from now to new audiences, new times, new currents in art making. ■

ABOVE: Noted jewelry designer Tina St. John was among the 21 artists and artisans whose studios were featured for Three Rivers Studio Tour 9. St. John hand crafts the metal elements in many of her works, as well as occasionally reconfiguring vintage jewelry parts into new pieces.

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