

ART

WOW FACTOR MISSING

You'll have to hunt to come away satisfied

By Larry Aydlette
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Is it a good thing when you can walk through an art exhibition and play spot-the-influences?

A touch of naive Americana here. Some photo-realism there. A little surrealistic whimsy in the corner.

Well, yes and no. At the "63rd Annual National Exhibition of American Paintings," the season-starter for the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach, you're not going to be wowed by

Art review

original vision. Or great art. These painters mostly provide variations on well-trod themes — ever-popular shades of tropical color, or floating abstract spheres, or kooky dreamscapes that need an introduction from Rod Serling.

And there are some ordinary Sunday painters that shouldn't be on the walls, period.

But hunt and peck and you will come away with just enough satisfaction, especially among a handful of promising local artists. In fact, the "National" in the title seems misleading because, if anything, this is a survey of Florida painters.

Let's get the head-scratching out of the way early. Susan Lubowsky Talbott, director of the Des Moines Art Center, selected 53 entries from 486 works submitted by artists in 22 states. The \$5,000 first-place award went to Boca Raton's James Pelish for *Amber*, a picture of an innocent face surrounded by a snowy parka. No offense to Pelish, but what Talbott saw in this portrait is unfathomable. Apparently, she felt it was free of obvious influences. You decide.

Speaking of influences, Sept. 11 is showing up as a theme, even though this competition's deadline was just three weeks after the terrorist attacks. A \$2,000 award went to Joseph Steiert of West Palm Beach, for a portrait of a lifeline Lady Liberty at the Twin Towers site, surrounded by flowing, social realist images of a firefighter, policeman and dazed victims. A timely, moving sentiment, but, unfortunately, not a polished work of art.

Kim Fay of Boynton Beach, who is represented by two large-scale oils, rightly won a \$1,000 prize. *Eroica*, the award winner,



AND THE WINNER IS!
Boca Raton artist James Pelish took the \$5,000 top prize for *Amber*, an oil on board, in the Society of the Four Arts' competition.

■ **63RD ANNUAL NATIONAL EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PAINTINGS**, through Jan. 6 at the Society of the Four Arts, off Royal Palm Way, Palm Beach. \$5 donation. Phone: 655-7226.

is a barricade of wood logs that suggests fluid, abstract forms. *Hurricane Mecca* is another intriguing abstract, an overhead view of spirals and winding staircase forms. Both are solidly executed.

Prominently displayed in the gallery's main hall are two colorful examples of dreamy playfulness by James H. Vredevoogd of Dunnellon. In one, the autumn-flavored acrylic *Stiff Breeze*, a broom stick floats above a suburban house (Harry Potter's everywhere!). Peek in the backyard, and a strange bull's-eye game is being played by men on stilts wearing strange hats. Odd, but fun.

A pleasant surprise comes from Vilas Tonape of West Palm Beach. His oil, *Colors of Self*, is a portrait of a man's head, ringed by tiny, colorful brushstrokes, set against a brown-washed background. It's one of those pictures where a simple scheme is immensely satisfying because of the artist's eye for spatial composition and facial detail. (Why can't we have more of these?)

Ditto with Gary Bolding of DeLand, who paints in a vivid, photo-realist fashion. *Corner Self Portrait* is a blank canvas with the artist's head peeking out of the bottom corner. It's the painterly equivalent of a pop-up book.

Another appealing work is Paul Chidester's \$1,000 award winner, *A Blustering Night, a Faire Day*. It's a blend of rural and modern fancy, with the letters of the title strung amusingly on poles in a landscape setting. Jupiter's Lois Barton provides a different modernist touch with *Metamorphosis*, a monotype on paper of darkening images fading in and out like acid eating through a movie frame.

And back to influences again. Eric Perry of Howey-in-the-Hills, offers two bright acrylics that play off classic photos of workers lounging on the steel girders of the Manhattan skyline. Here, the workers are naked, pumped-up and preening like Calvin Klein models. They may raise eyebrows, but one picture, featuring a naked nude in choreographic flight, is striking.

And that's about it, folks. Overall, the proportion of so-so paintings is high, and it's disconcerting to see some displayed in the classy environs of the Four Arts. That's the nature of competitions, though, making this exhibit worthwhile only as a chance to get familiar with local artists.

Better luck next year.