

Not a drop to spare

Six artists take 'A River's Journey' through the heart of the Santa Ynez watershed to the Wildling Museum



LONG JOURNEY:

The six artists of Rose-Compass—Connie Connally, Holli Harmon, Libby Smith, Nicole Strasburg, Nina Warner, and Pamela Zwehl-Burke—chronicled the journey of the Santa Ynez River from Jameson Lake to Surf Beach over the course of a year and half. Their work is on show at the Wildling Museum in Solvang through July 9.

BY REBECCA ROSE

There is an idea of water. There is an idea of how it bends. It cools, quenches, consumes. It drowns, rebirths, soothes. And it carries.

Artist Nicole Strasburg has been alive with all of these ideas about water for the better part of two years. Stepping back from a loosely scattered collection of paintings on the floor of the Wildling Museum in Solvang, Strasburg is tasked with turning her meditative thoughts into concrete ideas to hang on a wall for hundreds of strangers to analyze.

She ponders over thematic inferences, color schemes, and even the literal title of subject matter of the more than 100 works of art set to take over these walls for the museum's new exhibit, *A River's Journey*. Strasburg turns to fellow artist Holli Harmon as the two of them slowly retire into the comfortable debate of artists: purpose and meaning, shape and form.

"This is the real hard part," she explains, only half kidding.

Strasburg's purposeful obsession is the result of several years of fascination and study, aimed at creating an exhibit that tells the story of the Santa Ynez watershed, the lands fed and nurtured by the Santa Ynez River. Like a penitent monk devoted to scripture, Strasburg has slowly immersed herself in the water that flows through Santa Barbara County, all in the name of these small paintings gently laid out before her.

"In the womb you're surrounded by water, it's a natural state," she said in an interview with the *Sun*. "It's one of the things that we can't live without. As a painter, just beyond the sheer beauty of it, these are the things I think about."

Originally inspired by the work of another environmentally conscious artist, Strasburg and five other artists set out to chronicle the watershed. Bonded by their love of art and passion for conservation issues, artists Libby Smith, Pamela Zwehl-Burke, Nina Warner, Connie Connally, Harmon, and Strasburg formed a collective known as Rose-Compass. After more than two years of research, contemplation, and painting, their final works, crafted in an unusual medium known as gouache, are now on display at the Wildling Museum. *A River's Journey* features more than 25 paintings from each artist, each one presenting its own distinct vision and commentary on the water and the land it satiates.

But more than just an art show, the Wildling's exhibit also seeks to draw attention to the very real issues associated with water usage in the greater Santa Ynez Valley. The artists of Rose-Compass hope that the show will engage viewers in a broader conversation about the fragility of the watershed and the way humans who depend on it interact with it.

It rhymes with 'squash'

In 2014, the Wildling Museum in Solvang quietly unveiled what would become one of its most understatedly influential exhibits. Pennsylvania artist Thomas Paquette showed a group of paintings titled *On Nature's Terms*, in a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the *Wilderness Act*.

Paquette's work was visually stunning and cerebrally unique. He chronicled years of his visits to federal wildlife areas all over the

United States, including Arizona, California, Wyoming, and many more. Running through much of Paquette's work was a strong message about the value of natural resources, like a stream of environmental consciousness.

But aside from being a collection of highly evocative landscapes, one thing in particular struck some in the crowds who milled around his work. In 12 of the paintings, the artist chose for his medium, the now relatively rare paint known as "gouache" (pronounced *gwash*).

Gouache, an opaque watercolor paint, is a centuries-old medium favored by artists who seek the durability of acrylic paints and the quality of watercolors. Painters in the 1700s first began using gouache to paint or illuminate manuscripts. Before digital art became the standard in the industry, commercial artists of the 20th century favored gouache as a way to create highly defined lettering for advertisements.

The artists who would become the collective known as Rose-Compass were intrigued by what the paint with the funny name could do on canvas. Warner said they were mesmerized by the work, fascinated by how Paquette had managed to capture so much radiant light and detail in such a small space.

"They looked like little postage stamps," Warner said. "They were these beautiful bright little jewels. Paquette really got us looking at this medium."

Like watercolor, gouache is made of color pigment and a binding agent, such as gum arabic. But gouache has a much higher pigment ratio and is often thickened with another agent such as white chalk or acrylic. Gouache is especially distinct from watercolor in that it does not absorb into the paper; instead, it dries thick

and becomes rich with texture. That and its higher opacity give it a distinctive, if somewhat challenging, appeal to artists such as Smith.

"It was very different," Smith said. "It dries quickly, and it's a completely different temperament and color. It gets a little chalkier feeling than oil. It was really tough in the beginning."

Connally, a seasoned watercolor painter and former instructor, said the appeal lies in gouache's ability to behave like a less temperamental medium, such as oil or acrylic.

"As a watercolor artist, you very much have to start from light colors and go to dark colors," Connally said. "If you lay one color on top of another, it pulls the color from beneath and pulls them together. You have to keep building those dark colors until they are saturated enough. But with gouache, you literally can paint just as you would with oils and start with darker colors."

Warner said in the beginning that she and the other artists were mainly focused on experimenting with the medium, curious to see what they could do with it.

"We were excited about working in it," she said. "We just wanted to get together and paint and see where that took us."

Where it took them was on a near 100-mile journey through the beating heart of the county's most important natural resource.

Watershed down

It spans 92 miles and winds from the northern slopes of the Santa Ynez Mountains in Los Padres National Forest all the way down to Surf Beach in Lompoc, where it