

Chester Arnold

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Artists respond to our 'Age of Anxiety' in new Arts Guild of Sonoma exhibit

By Dan Taylor
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When the Arts Guild of Sonoma sent out a nationwide call for entries to its new exhibition, "Art in an Age of Anxiety," the arts cooperative, now in its 41st year, left it up to the individual artists to interpret the theme.

"Obviously, there's been a lot in the news," said guild vice-president and photographer Mark Zukowski. "The subject first came up about a year ago, so not only did we have a lot of political discussion going on, but we also had the fires taking place. There was a lot of anxiety in the air."

The prospectus sent out to artists nationwide put it plainly: "We are highly conscious of the perils of our era ... Artists help to chronicle, illuminate and cope with this anxiety."

The idea prompted an emphatic response, with 127 artists in 18 states submitting 315 pieces. From that incoming avalanche, the show's juror, respected Sonoma painter and educator Chester Arnold, chose 71 pieces by 63 artists from 10 states.

The resulting exhibition, which opens Aug. 30 and runs through Oct. 1 at the guild's gallery in downtown Sonoma, touches on issues including the environment, immigration and sexual assault; but much of the art is also intensely personal.

"I was pleased with the breadth of the interpretations by the artists as to what 'Age of Anxiety' meant to them. They came up with all sorts of interesting things," Zukowski said. "A lot of the art had more to do with inner feelings of anxiety."

One example of a piece that combines the political and the personal is "Santiago," a porcelain sculpture of an anguished face by Nancy Richards of Everett, Washington.

"If it's not personal it's not art," she said. "I was absolutely horrified when I found out about the immigrant children being separated from their parents. The feeling of a parent when you lose a child is horrific. When I saw all of these thousands of kids being torn apart from their parents, it just ripped up my soul. I've done a series of six sculptures called 'Asylum Seekers,' and they all have Latino names."

One of the more striking sculptures in the show sums up modern angst in a single word with the title “Screwed.” Yet it’s a playful name for the piece, which is a wooden cross covered with metal screws, standing on a wooden base that has nails pounded into it.

The creator of the piece is Maryann Steinert-Foley of Sonoma, who just recently joined the Arts Guild of Sonoma. The sculpture is primarily a response to abuse of children by Catholic clergy, but can be interpreted more broadly.

“It’s about the betrayal of the population,” she said. “You can’t have faith in your church. You can’t have faith in your president. It’s hopeless,” she said

But the artist urges viewers of her work to draw their own conclusions.

“I’m so excited when anyone looks at one of my pieces and sees something I didn’t,” she explained. “This is one of those pieces that speaks to a lot of things.”

The show’s entries don’t all necessarily reflect despair, despite the somber theme. One possible response to anxiety is to counter it with hope.

Oakmont photographer Janie Coltrin was walking through a vacant lot in San Francisco one foggy morning when she spotted a pile of boards that someone had decorated with simple spray-painted pink hearts. Shooting down on this impromptu art installation, she took a photo which she transferred to a 3-by-4 foot canvas and titled “Urban Hearts.”

“I will never know who did it. I went back the next day and it was gone, but I was hopeful when I first saw that loving tribute in an abandoned urban setting,” she said.

The exhibit takes its title, “Art in the Age of Anxiety,” from poet W. H. Auden, who coined the term in 1948. But this show demonstrates that those words still pack power and evoke a wide variety of responses.

“I’ve never seen an exhibit quite like this,” Zukowski said. “I think it’s unique.”