



Responding to hardship in creative ways

County artists 'Reflect' on a year spent in lockdown

April 23, 2021

By Melissa Simon
melissa@theacorn.com



TALENT—Belen Islas of Simi Valley is one of four artists whose works are featured in an exhibit titled "Reflect 2020" presented by the Ventura County Arts Council. Courtesy of the Ventura County Arts Council

In four storefront windows, four county artists are offering windows into how they handled the hardships of the pandemic.

It's all part of "Reflect 2020," an exhibition presented by the Ventura County Arts Council that's running through June at 1985 S. Victoria Ave., Ventura.

Carlos Grasso of Oak View, Josiah Guzik of Ventura, Belen Islas of Simi Valley and Ksenia McEuen of Ojai have each used one of the large storefronts to create a diorama in which they "respond to the hardships and reckonings afforded by the past year," according to a news release.

Drawing on their cultural backgrounds and personal insights, the artists created works that feature fanciful cabinetry, immersive color experiences, paper collage and other mixed-media elements.

“We have all struggled in different ways through the last year, so we asked artists to address their experiences,” said Wendy Osher, president of the arts council’s board of directors. “Especially in times of strife, divisiveness and isolation, the arts can . . . uplift (and provide) empathy and insights from multiple points of view outside of partisan news cycles.”



WE'RE ALL CONNECTED—Belen Islas' "Tree of Life" depicts the symbiotic relationship between people and nature. Courtesy of the Ventura County Arts Council

The four artists were chosen by a jury of arts professionals.

Islas said she was thrilled to be selected for her piece, “Tree of Life,” a roughly 8-by-13-foot paper tree with leaves of many colors.

She said she drew her inspiration from the colorful textiles used in *Tenango*, an art form from her hometown of Hidalgo, Mexico, that’s used to depict the symbiotic relationship between people and nature.

Like trees, people always find ways to build connection with one another, even when it seems impossible or we’re cut off from one another, the Simi artist said.

“The colorful circles at the bottom (of the tree) represent fungi that protect the roots and also act as a source for nutrients and means of communication,” Islas said.

“It’s a metaphor for a healthy community. And today, more than ever, we need each other to build a resilient society, especially after being isolated during the lockdown.”

Grasso’s acrylic-on-canvas display, titled “COLORSPACE,” is part of a series he calls “Canvas Destruction.” The artist said he used brilliant colors to compensate for the loneliness during the pandemic. The display changes colors throughout the night.

Guzik said his creation, “Nichos Volantes,” is modeled after the birds he observed in his yard during quarantine that became symbols of hope, light and freedom amidst the darkness and

despair.

McEuen's "Divided by Six" is comprised of three pieces with text and is made from steel sheet, PVC, plexiglass and wood. It deals with some weighty emotional matters: interrupted childhoods, the act of grieving for both friends and strangers, and having to comply with social distancing rules while in despair.

"The arts aim to communicate in ways beyond everyday dialogue," Osher said. "Reaching deeper and past the auto responses many of us live on, the hope is that viewers will feel a shiver of newness—a delight in seeing things in a slightly different way, even more empathy for others experiencing this crossroad in history. Inspiration to rise to better days ahead."

Islas said we, as a society, have to create a better world and she does her part using art.

"Most of my pieces are all about giving back to the community and I think that's how I can do my part to make the world better," she said.

Established in 1997, the Ventura County Arts Council is a nonprofit that works to provide arts education and opportunities in schools and other creative settings by advocating for local artists and organizations, and by creating partnerships between artists, supporters, businesses, foundations and other county agencies.

To enrich the "Reflect 2020" experience, the arts council has created a digital treasure hunt for children and adults. And on May 15, the artists are participating in a virtual conversation in which residents can ask them questions about their artwork.

For more information, go to vcartscouncil.org.