May Gallery Stroll: 300 Plates
Photos and thoughts from Art Access' yearly auction.

This past Friday, we were greeted with gusts of wind coming in every direction, as those who braved the face-blinking howls made their way through the Salt Lake Gallery Stroll. This month, I made my way over to Art Access for their 300 Plates fundraiser and exhibition. If you’re not familiar with this show, the basic idea is that roughly 160 prominent and rising artists in the community purchase and sign up to create original artwork on an 11” x 10” plexiglass plate. These plates, which have become highly sought after from local art collectors, are then auctioned off with the proceeds going toward the gallery to keep them running and bring in new talent throughout the year. Today we chat with Art Access’ Executive Director, Sheryl Gillilan, as well as participating artists Meri DeCaria and Hadley Rampton, about this year’s event. All with pictures for you to check out from Friday’s exhibition.

AccessArt.org

Hey everyone, first off, how has everyone been since we last chatted?

Sheryl: Life is good! Art Access has been busy rolling out workshops and programs, and I have been devoting more private time to creating my art quilts.

Hadley: I have been well, keeping myself busy with work at Phillips Gallery and my own paintings. Both are rolling right along.

Meri: Good, but very busy. I've been preparing for a show of my own (really a three person show) which will open in June at Phillips. That means putting in late hours after working at the gallery.
Fortunately, I’ve been able to squeeze a couple of trips in between!

What have you each been working on lately?

Meri: More of my wacky imagery.

Hadley: In March I had the pleasure of exhibiting watercolors I painted along the border of Myanmar and Thailand at Art Access, along with two wonderful artists from Myanmar: Maung Maung Tinn and Nyan Soe. The intention of the exhibit was in part to educate the community about the refugee crisis in that area of the world that has persisted for the past 40–plus years. Beyond that, I have continued painting scenes of aspen groves on site in our beautiful Wasatch Mountains.

Sheryl: I’m working on a series of modern art quilts based on artist Rod Romboy’s constellation paintings. They’re not my usual style or color and I’m invigorated by exploring something different. One of them got accepted into Southern Utah University’s new art museum exhibit in June, so I’m pleased about that.

Sheryl, for those who don’t know the history, how did the 300 Plates exhibition get started?

Sheryl: The story of 300 Plates begins in Thailand in the summer of 1993 when former board member, Joe Ostraff, was vacationing with his family. On a visit to a monastery, a monk gave Ostraff some photos of King Rama V. The monk assured Ostraff that using the photos in his art would bring good fortune, and Ostraff did incorporate them in an exhibit with fellow artist John Ohran 10 years later at Art Access. Entitled Restoration of Good Fortune: One Through Three Hundred and Fifty, the prices matched the number of the art. The exhibit generated substantial funds for Art Access and the Sudanese Refugee Fund, and then became the model for the current fundraiser, which Ostraff says continues to benefit from the Thai monk’s blessing.
What was the turnout like for the first few years at Art Access?

**Sheryl:** The turnout was modest the first year, but attendees increased quickly and it became almost a contact sport to purchase the plates. Over the ensuing years we refined the system and now refer to it as organized chaos, but at least nobody gets hurt in the pursuit of art. The past five years have sold out with a capacity of 500, and the fundraiser has become our largest source of unrestricted income.

**How has it been for you running it now that the show is a staple of the gallery?**

**Sheryl:** We’ve got the fundraiser down to a science now, with a detailed task timeline and lots of committed volunteers. The weather is always a crapshoot, but even when it rains, everybody seems to have a good time. It’s a good chance for us to give back to the wonderful artist community that supports us, and to get new patrons on board with our mission to tell the stories of all of us.
Meri and Hadley, what were your first impressions of the show?

Meri: I loved it from the start. People exhibited so much excitement for the concept. There was a real feeling of urgency that created a flurry of competition.

Hadley: The first time I attended a 300 Plates Show, Art Access was still housed in their old space on Pierpont. I remember it was an especially hot May evening and with the crowd of excited buyers, the interior of the gallery felt sweltering. Art Access had yet to devise the strategic manner in which people can select the plates they want to purchase in smaller groups. Buyers were practically fighting each other over plates; sweat was flying and chaos ensued. One might be turned off by such a scene but no, I was exhilarated. How could I not be when witnessing such passion over art, especially an art fundraiser! I was not a participant that year but I wanted to be. And so, when I was asked I jumped at the opportunity. I have loved participating ever since.

What made you both decide to get involved as artists?

Hadley: Let’s just say a desire to be part of something that brings out the local community’s passion and support for the visual arts.

Meri: It’s important for us all to find ways to give back to our community. The programming at Art Access provides wonderful opportunities for those who may have few ways to connect and become empowered by such a resource. As a painter, I can’t think of anything better than to support an organization that allows people of all abilities to benefit from the act of making art.
What kind of works have you painted for your plates over the years?

**Meri:** A variety of things, trees, birds, simple landscapes but mostly colorful abstracts.

**Hadley:** I generally paint one or two oil landscapes, painted with a palette knife, and one watercolor street scene; the two styles being indicative of my work.

How has it been for each of you to watch the show grow and change over the years?

**Hadley:** I have enjoyed watching the show become an eagerly anticipated event. It seems that many in the community practically count down the days to the opening. I believe this is not only due to the wonderful and varied plates that are created by the artists but reflects the fine job Art Access has done at making the event fun and exciting.

**Meri:** It has been nice to see it continue to be a fun and successful event. What is wonderful is to have seen so many artists participate over the years.
Tell us a little bit about this year’s show and the artists involved.

Sheryl: The fundraiser started out with about 35 artists doing multiple pieces of art, but for the last few years we’ve included about 160 artists and have asked each of them to contribute two pieces. We’ve got 45 new artists this year, and I figured out we’ve had almost 500 Utah artists participate in the fundraiser since the beginning. We’re very humbled by that kind of commitment because the artists donate 70% of their sales to Art Access.

Was there any criteria for this year’s show or was it whatever people wanted to paint?

Sheryl: Our main criteria is that artists create something for us in their signature style. Since I’ve been the director, I’ve been particularly interested in expanding the art beyond paintings to include such mediums as glass, assemblage, printmaking, and collage. This year, for the first time, we have an artist who “paints” with duct tape.
What artwork did each of you create for this particular showcase?

**Hadley:** I created two pieces, one in the manner of my sketchy, watercolor street scenes with a good amount of line work and the second, an oil landscape, somewhat abstract. These are the two styles/media in which I normally work.

**Meri:** I submitted two abstracts this year.

What are your thoughts going into Stroll for the opening reception?

**Meri:** I am ever hopeful that all or most of the plates will sell.

**Hadley:** I feel positive about this year’s event being another success and look forward to seeing all the plates. After all, not only am I one of the artists participating, I also get to be a viewer and possibly art buyer!
What can we expect from each of you over the rest of 2016?

**Sheryl:** Art Access will continue to come up with stereotype-busting exhibits and programs thanks to our uber-creative staff and board, and I plan to cut up more fabric and sew it back together with unexpected shapes and colors. Life is good!

**Hadley:** Toward the end of June I will be off to Cuba for a couple of weeks to explore the country and paint more watercolor street scenes. I can hardly wait! I will paint as many as I can onsite (my preference) then complete a few more from photographs after I return. The paintings will be shown in an exhibition I have scheduled at Phillips Gallery in June 2017. In November, I will be participating in Zion National Park’s Plein Air Art Invitational, an event in which 24 plein air artists from across the country are invited to paint in Zion National Park for a week. The event culminates with a wet paint sale comprised of the pieces painted with proceeds benefitting education programs in the Park. It is a great honor to be invited to participate, especially in this 100th year anniversary of the National Parks.

**Meri:** Continued dedication to improving [the] quality of life for all!
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