

JOY



Art Works Downtown



Mission

To provide an environment where visual arts thrive for the well-being of community.

Art Works Downtown, Inc, a 501(c)3 corporation, is Marin's premier non-profit art center. Located on Fourth Street, our 40,000 square-foot building houses four galleries, 33 art studios, a jewelers guild, frame shop, a ceramic center, a restaurant, 17 affordable apartments and more. We feature new exhibits and events every month including the popular 2nd Friday Art Walk.

Front Cover: Bonnie Kuhr, *Eden*, mixed media
Back Cover: Melanie Christie, *Ollie Olly Oxenfree*, mixed media

JOY

Artists:

Melanie Christie, Jeff Downing, Emily Dvorin,
Bonnie Kuhr, Stephanie Mohan, Yusuf Ssali

Susan Press, curator, artist, teacher

October 3–November 14, 2025

October 10 + November 14: Receptions + Art Walks

October 23, 6pm: Art Talk

Art Works Downtown

1337 Fourth Street, San Rafael, CA 94901
www.artworksdowntown.org

Production Staff

Elisabeth Setten, executive director
Stan Gibbs, program manager
Nate Castillo, gallery designer and installer



Curatorial Statement

When asked to curate this exhibit I began my search to find a select group of artists with the ability to communicate joy through their art. This led me to discover these six Bay Area artists whose work gives me a definite lift of spirit.

Looking at the many Bay Area talented artists, narrowing my search to those expressing this specific emotion was challenging. The pieces of art in this selection are filled with an array of glorious colors, playful imagery, joyful expressions and sometimes, the use of surprising and unusual materials. Many of these artists have also chosen to use recycled materials. The works all have the common ingredient of delight. I have a personal hope that those attending this exhibit will feel the joy emanating from the collection of the art as a whole, as well as from each individual creation. — Susan Press



Melanie Christie, *Prince Malcolm*, mixed media

Melanie Christie

One of the reasons that my work feels joyous is because I am finally making work that expresses my true artistic self. I grew up with parents that were artists and makers, and I have always been drawn to creating things. As early as I can remember I had a paint brush in my hand and in high school I began designing beaded jewelry. At SUNY Purchase I studied costume design and theater tech. My early career was spent as a freelance scenic painter, costumer and decorative artist in and around New York City. After moving to California and having kids I found myself running the art program at the local elementary school. I absolutely loved working with young kids and seeing the happiness that art making brought to them. At the same time I went back to school and got wrapped up in art classes at San Jose State University. There I fell back to painting, but it never felt completely like my true expression. When I came to the medium of mosaic, a door cracked wide open for me artistically. Then as I started to explore the medium more and hone in on my vision, I came back to beads. Now that I have my media figured out I can explore the themes that make me happy.

The entire process of making beaded sculptures brings me joy. From finding or sculpting the substrate to rummaging through bins of beads to painting collage paper to coming across that perfect vintage item at a tag sale — all of these activities feed different parts of my artistic exploration and that enthusiasm spills over into my work. Often, I draw on the theme of childhood joy — whether it is the anticipation of a first tea party or playing tag with friends on a summer evening. I let my imagination run wild and create a world where tinned fish are sparkly, slithery and spectacular instead of oily, smelly and grey. And I can't make a fantastical beaded frog without wondering if the smallest kiss would transform him into a prince.

melanviechristie.com



Jeff Downing, *Skipjack*, ceramics

Jeff Downing

Originally from New York, I moved to San Francisco at nineteen with just a suitcase and a guitar. My studies in painting and sculpture began at the Academy of Art College. My first ceramics class there was taught by Marin County artist Bill Albright. Further study of ceramic sculpture took place at San Francisco City College with artist Richard Moquin. I received both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Art at San Francisco State University, studying under Professors Joe Hawley, David Kuraoka, and Stephen De Staebler. My sculptural work has been shown worldwide, in Europe, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. Public art sculptures of mine have received awards in New York City, Minnesota and New Jersey. For the past 24 years, I have served as a Professor of Art and Ceramics Area Head at San Francisco State University.

The affinity I have for dogs stems from a lifelong fascination with their expressiveness, intelligence and sensitivity. In studying the dog, I aim to develop a better understanding of the connection between our society and the natural world. The dog's role in myths and personal reflections reminds us of the joy found in bonds with animals and nature. These loyal animals in our lives represent the comfort and wonder that bring us happiness.

My creative approach ensures that every piece is entirely original. It's a result of a spontaneous method of working, one that I liken to improvisational music. Having been a composer and musician before devoting my talents to sculpture, I see many parallels between working with clay and jamming on a guitar. My process of shaping the clay, giving it a distinct form, is often sparked by spontaneous creative impulses that are informed by time, rhythm and movement. The surprising and unpremeditated results of this performative approach leave tangible evidence of a moment in time imprinted in the clay. Instead of giving my surfaces a naturalistic appearance, my work is highly articulated with color and patterns, imparting the sculptures with a sense of the emblematic. The gestures that emerge from this process further bolster this abstraction, enabling the figures to point beyond themselves and suggest broader concepts related to human thought and emotion.

jeffdowningart.com



Emily Dvorin, *Oo-La-La*, zippers, thread, buttons, plastic embroidery canvas rope, yarn + cable ties

Emily Dvorin

My early work was creating traditional basketry always with unusual materials. I studied with Carole Beadle for four years in the early 2000's. Carole encouraged me to "find my voice and do my unique thing". Story telling is a vital part of my work. I call myself a sculptural basket maker. I am a self-taught, award-winning fiber artist. I teach, mentor, speak and exhibit all around the country. My work focuses on transforming common recognizable materials into innovative, "trans ordinary" vessels that reflect abstract ideas of the world around us, including societal excess and throwaway consumerism. I manipulate, construct, alter, coil and weave to develop pieces that marry modern aesthetic with whimsy and joy.

I strive to change the definition of basketry by exploring contemporary interpretations of traditional craft using non-traditional ingredients. I look at the world differently. I believe anything can be basket material. Thus, as unorthodox mediums are reinterpreted as fibers, I can illustrate the concept that even unexpected objects, that we take for granted, can become works of art.

emilydvorin.com



Bonnie Kuhr, *Flowering Maple*, mixed media

Bonnie Kuhr

My artistic journey includes a commissioned piece for the National Eagle Center in Minnesota along with a PBS special *Things that Fly*. From the Fiber Arts Network I received the International Excellence in Fibers Award in the sculptural category. I have had the opportunity to serve as a juror for the Mill Valley Art Festival. My educational background included four semesters of Fiber Sculpture study with acclaimed professor Carole Beadle. Working extensively in this field has led to receiving numerous awards and participation in invitational art shows.

The goal of my work as an artist is to convey a sense of synergism, connectedness and wonder through my presentation of nature. I also consider myself a sculptural artist finding transformation through dimensionality. Equally important is my desire to display beauty and promote happiness through my art while engaging the viewer. I draw inspiration by selecting topics and materials that speak to my commitment to the environment.

This new series is about the importance of flowers and pollinators that provide for the existence of life. In making the selection of materials, the overall concept is communicated through the aesthetics of my art. I use damaged and discarded vinyl records along with repurposed communications wire. These materials can take thousands of years to decompose in landfill. Using unconventional materials requires the creation of new techniques. I enjoy this challenge and find it rewarding when the underlying message is realized through my art. Along the way, I've come to understand that a unique medium can provide a new learning experience unveiling something extraordinary. I'm committed to creating art that has a lasting impression, expands the boundaries of creativity and simply brings joy.

artrocksmc.com



Stephanie Mohan, *Flying with Mom*, photograph

Stephanie Mohan

I have a vivid memory of my father, a very serious man, standing in a small room lit by a single red bulb. It was one of the rare times I saw him genuinely excited. He dropped a piece of photo paper into a tray of chemicals and we watched as an image emerged. That moment stuck with me and it ultimately led me to pursue photography as a career.

I earned my Bachelor of Arts in Photojournalism from San Francisco State University in 1996. Instead of joining a publication, I opened a small portrait studio right in downtown Fairfax, where I've been since 2000.

When I photograph someone, I'm always waiting for that split second when they let go-when the posing fades and something real emerges. Maybe it's a big laugh or an unguarded smile. That's when their true personality shines through. It's those unscripted, joyful moments I aim to capture because they can't be faked and they're the ones worth remembering.

I became a Fairfax Artist in Residence in 2016. In this role, I created the Fairfax Photo Club and organized the annual Fairfax Art Walk. I work with an organization called Pro Bono Photo, which I donate my time covering Bay Area protests and social justice actions. I love using my camera to give back to the community.

creativeportraiture.com



Yusuf Ssali, *Seasons Back Home*, mixed media

Yusuf Ssali

Yusuf Ssali was born in Kampala, Uganda, and migrated to the United States in 2017. He earned an MFA in Industrial Fine Arts and Design at Makerere University, Kampala. He has exhibited widely throughout Africa, Europe and the United States. His paintings and mixed media works are inspired by the riches of African culture. His work includes abstraction, images of women, animals, landscape, and more recently, urban cityscapes around the Bay Area.

Aside from the riches of Africa, Ssali's work addresses the challenges the continent faces in the current day. In his abstract paintings Ssali concentrates on the balance between intentionality and spontaneity, incorporating patterns and found objects that literally leap off the canvas in brilliant color. Intentions behind his work include his desire to communicate the connections of love, hope, joy and beauty, of human healing and spiritual growth.

Ssali is Executive Director of Kisa Foundation USA which sponsors Namungoona Children's Art Center providing free art instruction and practice for Ugandan children.

ssaliuyusufarts.com



Jeff Downing, *Saline*, ceramics



Stephanie Mohan, *Rocky and Poetry*, photograph

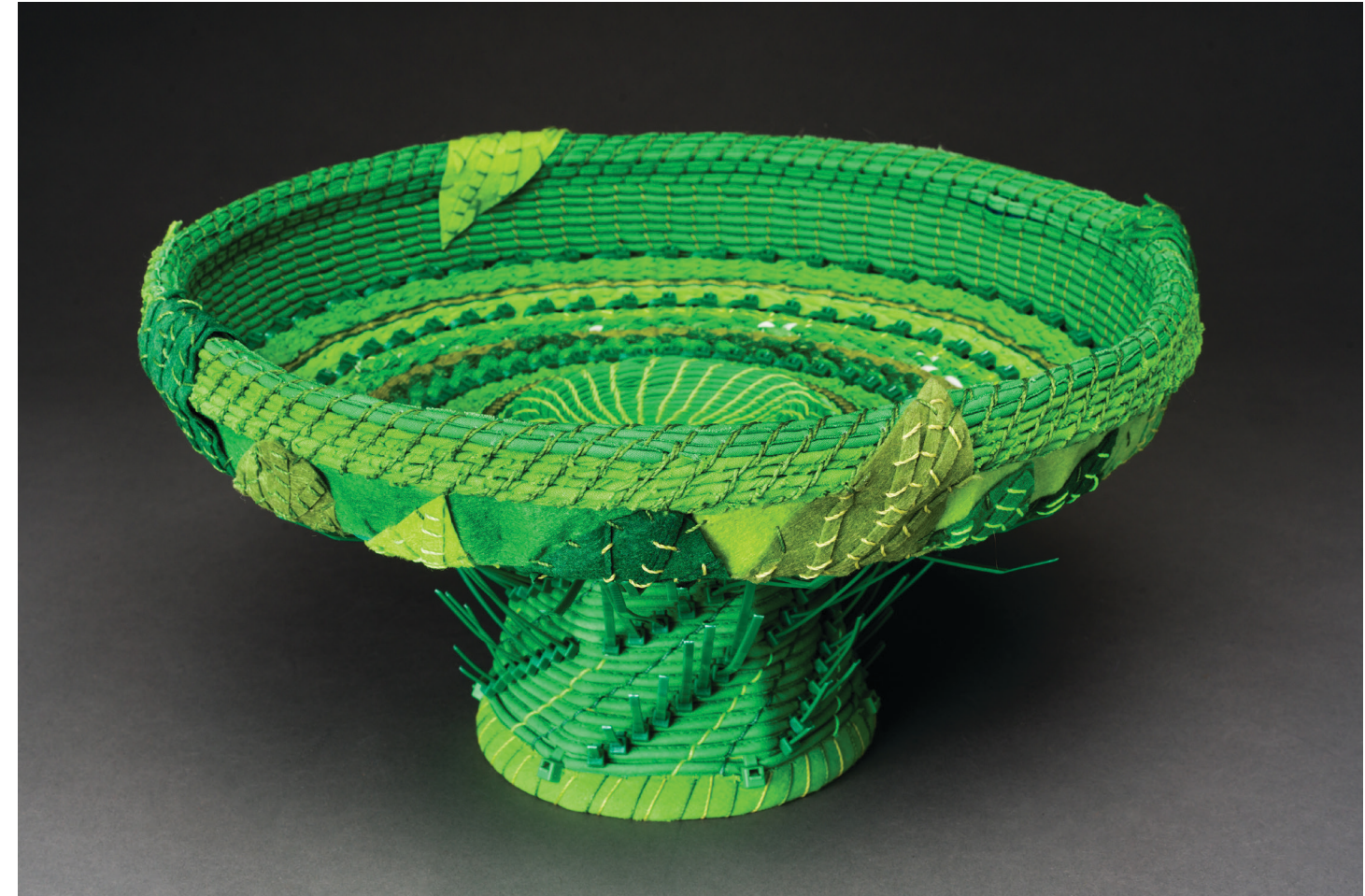
Curator: Susan Press



The thrill of curating exhibits began for me twelve years ago at the Marinwood Community Center in San Rafael where I continue to curate and install bi-annual themed art shows. I have been serving as the *Juror of Selection* for frequent shows at the Falkirk Cultural Center in San Rafael. What pleasure it is curating shows here in the Art Works Downtown Galleries. I earned my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics and printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute. Graduate work at San Francisco State University opened the world of teaching for me. Teaching art and guiding students to develop and celebrate their artistic skills provided the excellent background leading to the curation of art shows.

I am currently a member of both the Clay and Glass Association in Palo Alto and the Arts and Crafts Cooperative in Berkeley. My ceramic sculptures have been shown in many galleries throughout the United States. I was honored to receive *Artist of the Year* award at Marin County Fair fine art division in 2019.

Instagram: @SusanPress11



Emily Dvorin, *New Growth*, lampshade, electric fan cover, bias cording, fabric, plastic lacing, thread, florists wire & cable ties

Art Works Downtown

Art Works Downtown champions the idea that visual art is a universal language, a bridge between different cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. Art speaks to the core of our humanity, revealing the depths of our emotions, our dreams, and our shared experiences that often can't be expressed in words alone. Art is a path to understanding and truth. It inspires questions and challenges us to seek answers, engage, experience, and to grow as individuals and as a society.

Your donor support enables us to continue our mission: to provide an environment where visual arts thrive for the well-being of the community. Art Works Downtown is not just a place; it's a movement that works for our downtown, for our community, and for the countless voices that find expression through art. Together, we can ensure that art continues to work its magic in our lives.



Art Works Downtown is a 501(c)(3) public benefit organization and is community supported. Your donation is tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law.



Stephanie Mohan, *The Good Ol' Girls*, photograph



