

'As We Live It' 38 ways to perceive the world — a remarkable exhibition at City Hall

BY ED BOWERS

IMAGINE entering the lobby of City Hall, taking the elevator down to the basement, and entering a large room where 38 pairs of eyes are put inside your mind so that you can see how 38 different artists perceived the world through 94 works of art.

That is what the San Francisco Arts Commission and the San Francisco Study Center have generously contributed to the city, a cultural opportunity easy to access and of genuine significance not only to the art community, but to anyone open to understanding and respecting the unlimited creativity of the human mind.

The artists represented at this show are participants of the San Francisco behavioral health system.

Not that this factor has any significance when it comes to evaluating the quality of this art. If every artist was eliminated from the pantheon of art because he or she had a problem that needed to be dealt with, libraries would be filled with crossword puzzles and the museums reduced to exhibiting coloring books.

The first piece I observed upon arrival was "Preparing for the Dance," a painting by Charles Blackwell, a legally blind artist I have known and respected for years. The figure in this painting has a white outline, which very effectively conveys a primordial energy generated by the dancer, rather like that of an African shaman going into trance. It's a joyous work.

One of the artists in attendance, Michael King, who exhibited an untitled pastel of a starkly handsome face of someone who could be a street person, explained that he loves the creative process because it makes him feel like he's not wasting his days. On the contrary, Mr. King is bringing beauty into the world.

I observed that some of the paintings made use of words in order to extend their effects and clarify their meanings. For instance, Anamar's painting, "I Don't Reflect What I Feel," is a beautiful still life whose title adds poignancy to the work. Use of this title effectively conveys the artist's struggle to tran-

"As We Live It" features 94 works by 38 clients of San Francisco's Community Behavioral Health Services. The free exhibit runs through Sept. 9 in the basement gallery at City Hall. 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday.

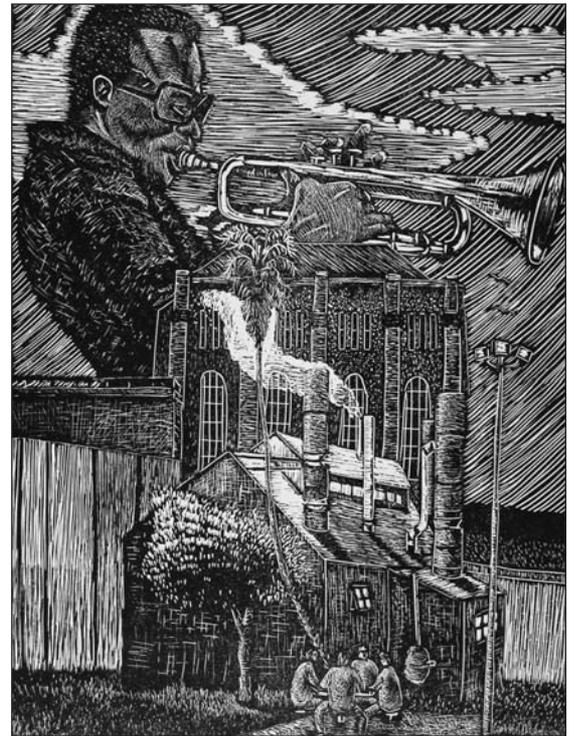
scend ugliness through art. The ability of an artist to generate beauty in spite of what he is really feeling is quite a skill. Real art is a transformative experience.

Ronnie Goodman's block prints have as their subject life as a prisoner in San Quentin, an experience Goodman has had firsthand: He spent five years incarcerated. Carved in linoleum, they are extremely dynamic and detailed, and combine images of spirituality and jazz to convey the flames of survival and hope, which every prisoner must cultivate to survive the punishing darkness of the federal prison system. If I had money, I'd buy them all.

I was really impressed with Ron Takeuchi's two portraits of cats, "Kitty Cat" and "The Billionaire Cat." The billionaire cat has such a king of the hill, smug and lordly expression that his persona explodes off the canvas. As a cat, he is cute as pie. As a person, I think I'd avoid him.

Magic, science and art have had an intimate relationship for centuries, as is clear in Jeff Roysdon's work. His painting, "Walkie Talkie," displays a walkie-talkie with prisms of color fanning out from it. It is a brilliant way of expressing the invisible spectrums of light that communicate to us directly from a multicolored universe that, when contemplated, appears scientific and magical.

As someone who loves surrealist art, I was thrilled by John Wotipka's work. This reclusive artist stands with the best painters in America, and his extraordinary technique conveys an immense emotionality and a vibrant translation of images of the unconscious into the form and fabric of art. His "Interaction 11" explores the power of both the conscious and unconscious mind interacting together at the same time. His self-portrait is one of the best communications of major

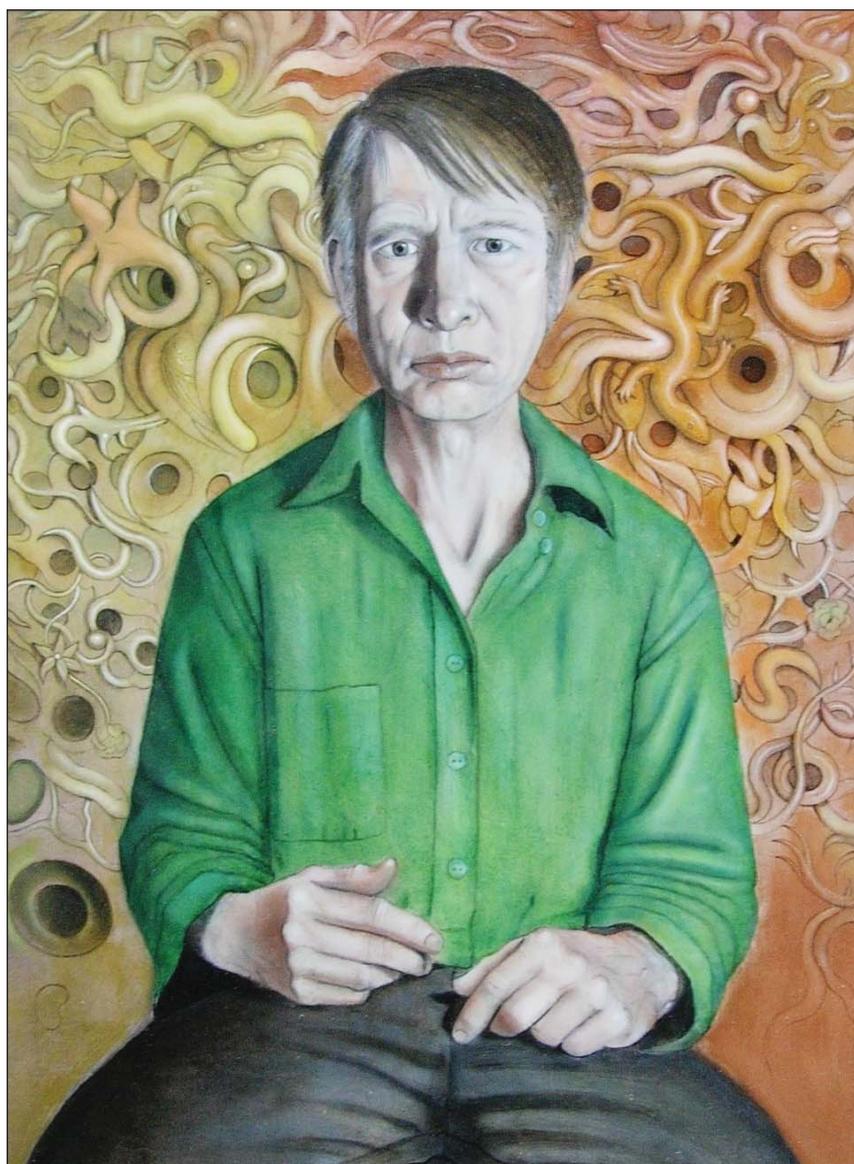


Ronnie Goodman carves his visions of spirituality and jazz into blocks of linoleum in finely detailed depictions of survival and hope.

depression that I have ever seen.

Raisa K's tapestry wall hanging, "Ukrainian Folk Song," is a striking portrait of a woman with an angelic demeanor, but with an intensely mischievous, almost demented, expression coming from her eyes. To look at her is to remember her.

I have only done a cursory review of eight of the 38 artists represented at this exhibit. I can assure the reader, however, that numerous other pieces on display are well worth seeing. ■



This self-portrait by surrealist John Wotipka rivals Edvard Munch's "The Scream" for its personal intensity.

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