

Sonoma Valley Museum of Art goes 'au naturale' in new outdoor show

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INDEX-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER | May 29, 2018, 8:08AM



(1 of 5) A bronze doe by Gwynn Murrill.

In the wake of last summer's successful inaugural run of outdoor public art, the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art is planning an encore. In a proposal reviewed by the City Council on March 5, museum Executive Director Linda Keaton pitched – and the council unanimously supported – a second season of “conceptually rich artworks that will encourage public dialogue and engagement.”

Opening June 8 at various locations on the Plaza is “Natural Affinity: California Women Sculptors in the Landscape” – an exhibition featuring, according to the museum, “a shared concern for the natural world as well as human-animal interests concerning friendship, love and the parent-child bond.”

The show highlights works by three sculptors: Gwynn Murrill, Alison Saar and Lisa Reinertson.

The work SVMA has proposed for the summer is perhaps more amenable to the average Plaza-goer than last year’s ambitious “Albert Paley: Thresholds,” which featured the large-scale industrial-looking metalworks of renowned New York-based sculptor Albert Paley.

“Natural Affinity” will dial back the edgier urbanity of the Paley exhibit. The exhibition will also address the gender disparity in the art world and elsewhere, featuring three “internationally celebrated” California women in a #metoo year.

“The fact that it’s California artists and they’re all women... I’m thrilled,” said Sonoma City Councilmember Rachel Hundley earlier this spring when the council approved the use of the Plaza for the exhibit.

Gwynn Murrill’s life-scaled sculptures are achingly smooth wood-block studies in human and animal “form” – she specializes in fauna that inhabit the California countryside.

“My primary point of departure when beginning a new piece is the memory of a form that caught my attention,” writes Murrill on her website. “It could be a cat walking through the studio, a coyote jumping from the brush, a ballet dancer casually

stretching.” Murrill’s work has been commissioned by the San Francisco Zoo and the U.S. Embassy in Singapore, among other collections.

Los Angeles-based artist Alison Saar’s themes are conveyed in sculptures using recognizably human forms. Her sculptures are born from both traditional and found materials and she often focuses on works related to femininity and the African diaspora. Her sculptures can be seen in Madison Square Park in New York and at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Working extensively in bronze, Lisa Reinertson describes her art as having “an underlying humanism,” representing everything from animal forms of the natural world to public sculptures of historic figures from the peace and social justice movements. Reinertson’s work can be seen at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento and near the Almaden Library in San Jose.

Compared to last summer’s twisted and towering steel portals, the 2018 installations may prove more user-friendly within the Plaza’s 8-acre parkland setting.

“I think people who weren’t so crazy about last year will find this more comforting and familiar,” Hundley said. “I can imagine these creature around our parks. It will be fun to come upon them.”

“I think children are going to be very interested,” added Mayor Agrimonti. “I think they will draw children.”

Each of the sculptures will require a base of steel plating as well as clamp fabrication, and all of them will need to be wired for illumination at night. SVMA and the city will share some of the cost to host the show – sourced from the council’s discretionary fund and estimated to run around \$5,000. An additional \$2,000 will be set aside for managerial costs, oversight of which will be handled by city Special Events Manager Lisa Janson.

So for its second summer, the Sonoma Plaza will host another season of outdoor art, thanks to the efforts of SVMA.

“We believe the project has great potential to engage civic dialogue and community, attract attention and economic benefit, connect our community with art and artists, and enhance the public appreciation of art,” Keaton said.

Of course, everyone’s a critic – perhaps in Sonoma as much as anywhere. The city and the museum were reminded of this last year, as Paley’s jutting metallic milieu probably earned equal parts kudos as it did criticisms.

“Last year, we weren’t sure how things would turn out,” acknowledged City Councilmember Amy Harrington at the March meeting. “We said – whether you liked it or not, (the art) would generate a lot of debate. That happened, and it was fun to watch.”

Added Harrington: “Even those who didn’t like the work had fun talking about it.”

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