

Artist travels to Italy

Debra Van Tuinen shows encaustic works in prestigious show
Encaustic works on the way to prestigious show

BY LISA PEMBERTON

THE OLYMPIAN

Debra Van Tuinen's work tools are simple: A hot plate, two irons and cheap, wide-bristle paint brushes -- the kind that usually are used to stain fences or prime walls.

"I used to have all these frying pans," she said, while leading a tour through her 800-square-foot studio and gallery across from Olympia Farmers Market.

But now, she melts the pigmented beeswax that she paints with in metal pie tins. They're much more upscale, she joked.

Van Tuinen, who specializes in encaustic painting, will take three of her pieces on the road next month to the prestigious Florence Biennale in Italy. The internationally renowned event is hosting its fifth edition from Dec. 3-11 in the historical Fortezza da Basso.

Nearly 900 artists from 72 countries participated in the event in 2003. The Biennale was created to promote dialog and diversity through art.

"I'm very excited about it," said Van Tuinen, who has lived in Olympia for nearly 20 years.

Though, because of some language barriers, the artist said she's yet to find out how she was selected for the show.

"When I go there, I'm hoping to find out how they found me," she said.

During the next few weeks, Van Tuinen is exhibiting the pieces she'll take to Italy at her gallery. They include "Old Growth -- New Life," which is made up of three door-height panels painted with layers of gold, red and forest green wax; and "Indian Paintbrush Memory," which features layers of orange, yellow and soft pink wax.

Van Tuinen hasn't decided which other piece to take. Earlier in the week, she was leaning toward "Deception 1 & 2," a series of dark red paintings adorned with copper leaf.

Art collector Greg Miller of Olympia said he's excited Van Tuinen was chosen for the Biennale.

"It's huge," he said. "They just don't ask that many people to come over, especially from here. It's worldwide."

Miller owns two of Van Tuinen's paintings, and he's followed her career for several years.

"She has such a great sense of light and space," he said. "Her work has just progressed, as I've seen it over the years. It's become more luminous."

Van Tuinen said she draws inspiration from nature scenes, such as gardens, forests, beaches and sunsets.

She has worked as an artist her entire life, trying her hand at everything from sculpting to jewelry making, while raising her 16-year-old daughter, Austen.

"I did a lot of years of waitressing," Van Tuinen said, laughing.

She learned about encaustic work -- one of the oldest art forms -- about seven years ago. Encaustic is a method of painting in which colors in wax are fused to a surface with hot irons.

One of the main reasons she continued with encaustic painting was because it is nontoxic, unlike most oil paints and other popular mediums.

"I really wanted to get away from that because there are so many artists who have gotten sick," Van Tuinen said.

Her artwork sells for \$300 to \$6,000, depending on the size.

In addition to being at her gallery, it's on display at galleries in Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Palm Springs and Montreal, Vancouver, B.C.

Some of her work has been rented for movies and television shows, too. And soon it will be in Italy, for the Biennale.

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Steve Bloom/The Olympian
Olympia artist Debra Van Tuinen stands next to one of her pieces of artwork, "Old Growth/New Life," which will be among pieces on display at a prestigious Florence, Italy, art show.

See the show

What: Preview of Van Tuinen artwork set for the Florence Biennale

Where: Van Tuinen Art, 111 Market St., Suite 107, Olympia -- across the street from the Olympia Farmer's Market

Hours: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and by appointment

More information: Call 360-352-4117, visit www.vantuinenart.com or see www.florencebiennale.org.