

# Small Expressions: Major Impressions

by Jeff Olson

To begin I would like to first thank the board, staff and volunteers of the Northwind Arts Center for their dedication to making this show a reality, especially in these challenging times. It's been a privilege to work with them and I appreciate all that they have done to facilitate my participation.

A few quick comments on the selection process. First of all, I was astounded by the quantity and quality of submissions. I was also happy that I was allowed to include as many works as I did, being able to show the depth and breadth of talent being shared. The entries were compiled on-line, and I made my way through the 400 plus submissions, looking at thumbnail size images of each work, enlarging them, one at a time, and considering their individual merits.

After selecting the field, it came down to the very hard work of determining which few pieces stood out as meritorious, both as they related to the theme of the show and their own intrinsic value. Not being able to see the work in person required that the gallery staff needed to record the entire show, walking through the space to each piece, so I could see them all, in the context of the gallery and hoping to catch a glimpse of that special quality that would speak to me.



**Judging is a subjective process**, assisted by experience, knowledge, and yes, personal taste. Ideally, judgments are based on a practiced eye, developed through many years of seeing and perceiving the often-subtle factors that distinguish a work of art. Sometimes it's an immediate reaction; while other times a careful deliberation. Recognizing excellence is something that is learned. Experience builds confidence, of course, but the ability to defend one's own judgment is always at hand' and plays an important role in being able to explain the "Why and the How", which is what I hope to accomplish this evening.

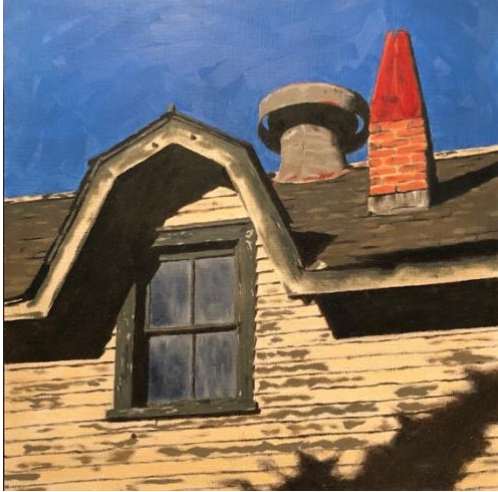
The theme Small Expressions seems straight forward enough, a selection of works being under a certain dimension. But of course, there is more to it than that. Working small, as it were, requires some special considerations. It's about doing a lot with a little, and this refers to more than just scale.

The word "Small" in the English language is not complementary. Synonyms include insignificant, minor, unimportant, diminutive, a sense of being less than normal.

Of course, we all know better, that great things can often come in small packages...many of life's mementos carry significant emotional power dependent upon their history and/or context. So how, as an artist, do you fill a "small" work of art with the type of emotional, intellectual and expressive power needed to impact the viewer in a meaningful way, all within the boundaries of 15 inches?

I believe there are concrete ways to achieve this beyond sentimentality or shock, and they include: intricacy of expression, intimacy of design, refinement of material and form, and thoughtful focused communication that can work (independently or in partnership) to create a visually engaging work of art.

**Fort Worden 2 by Mark Smoot**, at first glance, offers us a narrow and confined view. The colors are spare, and the limited palette contributes to a sense of restraint. Our vision of what must be a large home or building, is restricted to a lone window, either emerging into the light of dawn, or receding into the shadows of dusk.



**Fort Worden 2 by Mark Smoot**

Sharp, severe, almost black shadows frame the only comforting element, the warmth of the light that shines on the side of the weathered and worn siding. There is a clearly defined abstract sensibility in this painting, yet it is layered with poetic meaning. What at first glance seems spartan, is filled with feelings of isolation, loneliness, melancholy and a sense of mystery and longing. Not to acknowledge the paintings nod to Edward Hopper would be remiss, and it shares with Hopper a nuance that results in the type of sensitivity of expression that I find striking and particularly poignant of where we are in this place in time.

My first impression of **Rifflers & Beads by Sharon Kita** appeared to me as a playful endeavor. But upon further glance this scrappy looking figurine had a much deeper tale to tell. The symbolic inclusion of the two rifflers seen here, small files made for intricate and specialized work, speak to the process of making and elevate the hand and the role of the artist in creation. There is a definite ceremonial feeling that pervades. The careful construction and distinctive personality give it the presence of a reliquary or ancestor offering. It is functional and sculptural, but also transcendent. I became intrigued by what might lie inside. What treasure, memento, remembrance, or tribute may lay within, carrying a personal meaning beyond my own experience. Art can be magical, especially when it asks us to look outside of our own experience.



**Sand Painting #5 by Kathy Fridstein**

For me, transformation lay at the heart of what makes art meaningful. When objects or materials are in what I call a “state of becoming”. That moment between what they are and what they might be. It is related to what is known as pareidolia, seeing familiar shapes or patterns in otherwise random or disparate objects. But more importantly, it relates to how we create and perceive works of art. In **Sand Painting #5, by Kathy Fridstein**, what we find quite simply are the remnants of surf grass on the beach. The detail, texture and fineness of grain are enough to draw one in, and as we continue to look, we uncover much more, and that physical impulse to decipher and define, to imagine, take us on a wondrous journey of discovery. The previous life of the grass is echoed in its final resting, it seems to still be tossing at sea, like one of Turner’s ships in a storm. There is a mischievous spirited quality like that of an otter or seal at play. The contrast of textures between the grass and sand, create the sense of being lifted into flight, like the breaching of a whale. Or maybe it’s just a lump of surf grass on the beach. To find good subjects for art, the artist need not look any further than what lay at their feet. It is the making that elevates the subject to art, not the subject that elevates the making of art.



**Rifflers & Beads by Sharon Kita**

There are many traditional qualities to consider when evaluating a painting, they include the application of the paint itself, the integrity of the marks, shape, value, color, and for representational work, a believable impression of the subject, its intrinsic qualities and relationship to its surroundings.

In contemporary art, these qualities may become subjugated to (or liberated from) the content, meaningful only through the intentions of the artist and its contextual relationship to social and cultural institutions.

On a formal level, **A Moment in Time by Barbara Luttrell**, exhibits all that is required. The application of the paint is both believable and expressive, reminding me of the wonderful winter world of Andrew Wyeth. The colors naturalistic and full of feeling and emotion. The composition grounded. The surface echoes the act of making and a wintery landscape that is both opulent and stark.



**A Moment in Time by Barbara Luttrell**

Ultimately though, what drew me to this painting was its restraint, both in the making and message. Its subtlety and nuance spoke to all the elements that the theme of this show called for, intricacy of expression, intimacy of design, refinement of material and form, and thoughtful communication, all working in harmony to create this visually engaging work of art.

As I mentioned in the beginning, judging is a subjective proposition, guided by personal experience and an honest desire to recognize the achievements of the few, out of a group of so many talented individuals and expressive works of art. A Jurors selection does not represent a universal truth. I don't believe in universal truth, and at least that such a truth, if it does exist, can be determined by mortal beings. We carry too much baggage; that of family, tribe, society, culture. All weigh heavy on our judgment, of the self, and of others. It is my belief that the best we can do is as Emerson say's, "be useful, be honorable, be compassionate, and have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well." And in the words of Pythagoras, "seek the truth, and knowing it, share the light with those whom we associate as we travel along life's pathway."

For those of you whom I have recognized, you have my sincere congratulations and appreciation for your achievements as I have related here tonight.

For those who were not singled out, do not be down hearted or deterred from your artistic endeavors. There is not a single work of art in this exhibition without merit. Your work is meaningful and has purpose. By entering and exhibiting, and your bravery to do so, and it takes courage to enter a juried show, you have proved the seriousness of your intentions. The opinion and expectation of others means little next to the pursuit of your dreams according to your own vision and purpose.

I would again like to give my thanks to the the board, staff and volunteers of the Northwind Arts Center, for the opportunity and honor, and my sincere thanks to all the artists, you have my sincere appreciation and congratulations.

JEFF OLSON is a Seattle based artist with a significant and original body of work spanning more than twenty-five years. Jeff holds an MFA in painting and drawing from Washington State University. He has an extensive exhibition record and professional practice history in art education and the art materials industry. Olson lectures throughout North America as the Director of Art Education for Royal Talens, a Dutch manufacturer of artists materials. His talks deliver meaningful insights into the history, development, and application of artists' materials. [www.jeffolsonart.com](http://www.jeffolsonart.com)