

PREVIEW

NJ Celebrates 50 Years of Fostering Arts and Culture



E by Ilene Dube

Every now and then it's good to be reminded that New Jersey, with a cultural identity often overshadowed by New York's, plays an important role in American arts. From the landfills and the oil refineries to the Jersey Shore and the Sourland Mountains, the Garden State is fertile ground for art makers.

Nearly 50,000 professional artists live in New Jersey, and thousands more exercise creative expression, whether as performers or visual artists. Artists are the creative capital of our communities, and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts promotes, encourages, and assists them to achieve their highest ambitions, enabling public understanding and appreciation because artists really do make New Jersey a better place.

The New Jersey Arts Annual Special Edition is on view at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton, highlighting the works of artists chosen for their excellence in drawing, photography, sculpture, painting, ceramics, glass, metal, wood, and mixed media.

The exhibition celebrates the 50th anniversary of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (NJSCA). In its half century more than 1,300 artists, craftspeople, or folk arts apprentices have received grants from or participated in exhibitions sponsored by the NJSCA.

Walking through the first-floor gallery, a viewer feels a sense of pride in our state and its commitment to the arts, from the industrial landscapes of Tim Daly, Robert Birmelin, and Valeri Larko (amber skies over ribbons of highway, mountains of rusted refuse, towers of oil refineries) to Mel Leipzig's first two panels of what will eventually be a five-panel painting.

Leipzig, often called New Jersey's greatest living painter, takes

us into the offices of the State Arts Council (located on State Street just next door to the museum) in "Homage to the Arts of New Jersey" (2017). The painting reminds us that our state has been home to the likes of Paul Robeson, Walt Whitman, Meryl Streep, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, Amiri Baraka, and Pablo Medina. Among the papers on the desks are a program for Princeton's McCarter Theater, and other documents bearing the names of the state's museums: Newark, Jersey City, Ellerslie, Montclair, Morris, Noyes, Aljira, Princeton University Art Museum, and of course the New Jersey State Museum.

We also see works on the walls of these offices by New Jersey artists Ben Shahn, Winslow Homer (he summered on the Jersey Shore), and Jacob Lawrence (born in Atlantic City). Behind the desk sits senior program officer of arts education Robin Middleman, and in the corner of one desk is a reproduction of Leipzig's own painting of artist Bernarda Bryson Shahn.

"The arts are not a frill," said U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan (1936-1996), who in 1976 was the first black woman to deliver a keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. "What is there that can transcend deep difference and stubborn divisions? The arts. They have a wonderful universality. Art has the potential to unify. It can speak in many languages without a translator. The arts do not discriminate. The arts can lift us up."

Indeed this is a star-studded affair. "There's Something about New Jersey," a video produced by the NJSCA, includes some of the state's biggest names: Susan Sarrandon, Meryl Streep, Junot Diaz, and Robert Pinsky. Former Governor Tom Kean makes the case that

it's vital to have public funding for the arts, emphasizing that money spent on the arts is not spending but investing: "With the arts you get more back ... the state has a responsibility for the arts." For the council's "Expect the Unexpected" campaign, art stars talk about food, poetry, music, and folklore.

Through the Folk Arts Apprentice Program, the council awards grants to encourage the passing along of cultural art forms in traditional settings. Stipends to master folk artists and craftspeople can help apprentices develop greater skills, and since 1995 these grants have been awarded to more than 100 apprentices in different cultural communities. Curator and New Jersey State Museum director Margaret O'Reilly chose a selection of these Folk Art Apprentices for the exhibition.

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On one wall hangs "Mayan Egyptian Harmony," a weaving by Armando Sosa. In 2016 Sosa was the NJSCA's first-ever recipient of the Folk Arts Master Artist Award. "I feel very honored. It's like a big door opening in my life," Sosa said at the time.

The award honors his lifetime achievement, artistic excellence, and significant contributions made to New Jersey's folk and traditional arts.

The Hopewell resident has been weaving since his teens in Guatemala, where he learned from the male members of his family whose livelihoods were made from the craft. After moving to the Princeton

area in 1993, and with the encouragement of several local artists, Sosa began to weave again. His textiles are created on hand-made, wooden looms which he builds himself, and each work requires at least 100 hours to complete. The brilliantly colored tapestries present themes and images of Guatemala, which include symbols derived from dreams and memories of Sosa's heritage.

In addition, about half the works in the exhibition are from the museum's own collection. "This is a retrospective of what the NJSCA has contributed to the visual arts of New Jersey," O'Reilly says.

The earliest work in the exhibition is a glass paperweight by Paul Stankard, made in 1968, and the newest work is Leipzig's in-progress polyptych. "Both artists are still working today," O'Reilly points out.

"Everyone knows George Segal's sculpture, but he was also a printmaker," says O'Reilly of the inclusion of an aquatint, "Girl in Bluejeans: Back View." The same is true of Mel Edwards, she adds.

George Segal is also the subject of a 1987 photograph by Donald Lokuta. The sculptor is seated in the former Townhouse Restaurant in Trenton, now a PNC Bank. Behind Segal is a mural painted on the wall, part of the capital city's forgotten history. "George and Donald were good friends and would go out and take pictures together," recounts O'Reilly.

New Jersey artists' influences range from historical to international and internal. Franc Palala's "Leaning Tower of Suitcases" is made from vintage valises with illuminated images of leaning towers at tourist sites. Winifred M. McNeill's "Intimation of Memory" has tiny glazed porcelain heads looking up, seemingly lost.

Wendell White's photograph, "Slave Collar," from the Alexander

Two panels of Mel Leipzig's 'Homage to the Arts of New Jersey.'

Library Special Collections, is, against the stark black background, a haunting reminder of our nation's history.

The exhibition includes one video, "Color Yourself Inspired" (2016) by Andrew Demirjian, which generates infinite color combinations: "Yellow haze cedar grove," "gentle gray St. Patty's Day Mayonnaise," "George Caprona on my mind," "luscious carbon copy," "rushing river cafe au lait."

Many of the works will bring forth a *deja vu*, of the artist if not the work itself, for regular visitors to the museum: Shoshanna Weinberger's "Mend Thine Liv'ry Flaw: The American Pin-ups," last seen in the 2014 in the New Jersey State Museum "America Through Artists' Eyes" exhibit. It is an American "flag" with 50 pinups of a figure with a prominent derrière, big Afro, and lips in either red or pink—each pinup represents a state; Elaine Lorenz's "Beyond," suggestive of flesh and seed pods, exhibited in the '90s; and works by Dahlia Elcayed and Toshiko Takaezu. Princeton area artists include Susan Hockaday and Shellie Jacobson.

With works in colored pencil, recycled fabric, handmade abaca, paper, Xerox transfer, fresco on paper and glass beads, "All of these artists have a love of material," says O'Reilly.

The New Jersey Arts Annual Special Edition, New Jersey State Museum, 205 West State Street, Trenton. Through August 13. Suggested admission \$5. 609-292-6464 or www.state.nj.us/state/museum.