



MICHELE BENSON

TIMING IS RIGHT Members of the Santa Cruz Art League reach a huge milestone this week and gear up for the future.

Party Time

The Santa Cruz Art League hits 90.
But what lies ahead looks pretty darn good. | BY SYLVIE BOLAND

Nestled away from the busy corner of Broadway and Ocean streets, behind a small, sweet garden is the Santa Cruz Art League (SCAL). A haven, SCAL boasts an exhibition space filled with tremendous quantities of art, bustling classrooms, a theater and, most important of all, a community of art lovers, driven by unrelenting dedication and passion to keep SCAL alive and thriving.

Founded in 1919, SCAL is gearing up for its 90th birthday, with a big party (and a cake) at 3 p.m. on May 16, followed by an Art Faire on May 23 and 24. The faire, featuring 20 art booths, hourly raffles, fresh food for sale and free presentations of improvisational and children's theater, is a fundraiser for SCAL.

At the party, Santa Cruz Mayor, Cynthia Mathews, will deliver a proclamation to Bess Blodgett and Delilah Steinmann. Aged 98 and 9, respectively, Blodgett and Steinmann are the oldest and youngest members of SCAL.

When Steinmann, a fourth grader, found out she would be accepting the mayor's proclamation she was thrilled. "It's a big deal for me," Steinman says. "I was only three when I found this neat little building filled with art that I liked. Now everyone at the Art League is like my family."

And the SCAL family can't wait to celebrate. Michele Benson, the administrative director assistant and receptionist asks: "How often do you get to celebrate a

90th birthday?" Benson's voice fills with pride as she reflects on the women who raised money to buy the bricks used to build SCAL by selling baked goods and clothesline art. Throughout the years, members have been driven by self-expression and art. Benson believes this drive has made SCAL one of the best state-of-the-art galleries in Santa Cruz County.

Despite the consistent financial struggles, which plague many nonprofit art groups, SCAL has tirelessly refused to back down or stray from its goals. Their mission has always been to function as an agent for the artistic experience. The 11 original founders were united by a desire to have a place to meet where they could share, teach and motivate art. "We are the oldest nonprofit in Santa Cruz County that is still chugging along," Benson says. "This is quite a claim to fame, surviving in any environment is difficult but particularly in this economy. The fact that we are so unstoppable can mostly be attributed to the dedication, heart and passion of all the people involved."

Benson loves the unexpected nature of SCAL. "I never know what is going to meet me when I walk in the

GT 5-14-09

Art + Artists - Jess



MICHELE BENSON

door," she says. "Sometimes it's the pitter-patter of kids' feet, or maybe laughter leaking through the theater doors. Other times I'll hear classical music coming from the gallery and the docents taking down one show and setting up another. Everyone here is on a wonderful ride of self-expression and creativity."

To commemorate this passion, SCAL's party will feature an exhibit with more than 20 works from the group's earliest members, which has been loaned from the Museum of Art & History and pulled out of archives for the event, and will show from May 13-14. The exhibit will include all of co-founder Frank Heath's work. Heath served as SCAL's first president.

Today, T. Mike Walker is the president of SCAL. Upon his retirement from teaching, Walker returned to his old hobby, art, and wound up with a full-time job. Not only does Walker design funky collages like the ones he used to sell to psychedelic shops on Haight and Ashbury streets in San Francisco in the 1960s, but the 71-year-old SCAL president also acts as executive director. "I don't get a salary," Walker says. "We realize this job needs to exist but in order to hire someone we have to figure out what all their duties will be." So, to evaluate what the position entails and to save up enough money for an actual hire, Walker is doing the work pro bono. "It has taxed me for everything," he says. "I won't be able to do this forever. Hopefully in two or three years we will have increased our membership and will have enough money to hire someone to do this for real." But, SCAL knows this won't be a cheap endeavor. Walker explains that in order to get on more solid financial ground they have to have at least two fundraisers a year. "Currently, we are running lean and mean and being incredibly creative," Walker says. "We are finding new shows, attracting new people and having a hell of a good time doing it. We have close to 500 pieces showing right now. In the past, we have had things hanging from the ceiling," he chuckles. "It is wild; everywhere you look there is art."

The abundance of art is what drew Terri Steinmann to SCAL in 1991. "[SCAL] is such an easy place to connect to the arts," says Steinmann. "Being a young artist can be daunting, and here you find such a friendly environment."

Steinmann's theater company, West Productions, is organizing the entertainment for SCAL's Art Faire. The on-site theater will be open to any local musicians or dancers who feel so inclined. On Saturday, Michelle Kiba, 'the ukulele lady,' and her band will perform, as well as "Singing Wood Marimba," a local eight-piece band made up of African xylophones.

Steinmann encourages the public not to be fooled by the outside of SCAL explaining that its sleepy look is deceiving. "[SCAL] is filled with energy, and it feels like home to a lot of people," Steinmann says. "That's what has really kept this place going: the relationships."

Walker agrees, and is excited to watch SCAL grow. "We are continuing to improve and build on what we have," Walker says. "We want to make this the best damn gallery on the Central Coast."

The Santa Cruz Art League's 90th birthday party is at 3 p.m., May 16 at SCAL, 526 Broadway, Santa Cruz at 3 p.m. The 90th birthday exhibit will show May 13-24. Support SCAL at the Art Faire, May 23-24, 10 a.m to 6 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, visit scal.org/index.php or call 426-5787.