

By CANDACE ATKINS

# A fanatic finds paradise in 41st Avenue art gallery

**L**ike a rare blossom in the middle of a weed patch, the new Grayhouse Fine Arts Gallery, located across from the K-Mart on 41st Avenue, provides Santa Cruz County residents with yet another opportunity to view and purchase original artworks by internationally known artists.

But the location is not all that's different about this gallery. A visitor there, standing in quiet study before a modern masterpiece, could have his reverie suddenly shattered by a voluble outburst from a slightly wild, gesticulating man as he passes through.

But not to worry, he's one of the owners, and not only does he know art, he knows what he likes and says so at the top of his voice.

"I can't help it," says the lanky, sports-coated, sandled figure. "Art to me is life. There is no denying its spirituality. Something happens when I see great art — there is a connection."

More than 80 pieces by modern masters, including Chagall, Picasso, Miro, Braque, Klee and Matisse, will

## Art review

be exhibited through mid-November in the two-room gallery. Prices range from the very affordable (a lithograph by Buffet for \$150) to a \$3,600 woodcut by Heckel.

But money is not the point of fine art, according to gallery owner Janis Gray. "It is the responsibility of the community to have fine art and to hand it down to their children and grandchildren. We want to provide people with an opportunity to have art — great art — without driving to San Francisco," she said.

Mrs. Gray said all works now on exhibit are owned by the gallery, and are handpicked personal favorites of herself and her artist husband, Ralph.

"We always buy what we like, and if it doesn't sell, we keep it ourselves. I get very attached to the works. If we sell a painting, for example, we always ask permission to buy it back if the customer ever decides to resell," she added.

If Mrs. Gray is attached to her art, her husband considers it a necessity to life itself.

A Southerner with a European accent, Gray stomps through the gallery, flailing his arms and shouting to affirm the joy, pain and exaltation he receives from art. He drops names and stories too rapidly for anything except a tape recorder set on "fast forward" to catch, but the conviction cannot be missed.



Grayhouse Fine Arts Gallery owner Janis Gray

Photo by Kurt Ellison

Like a hardshell Baptist preacher, Gray's zeal raises and falls as he sweeps by the artworks, alternately whispering and calling out "in the name of God Almighty" the value — the utter necessity of timeless, great art.

Immediately overbearing and obtrusive to many gallery patrons, Gray admits his style is a handicap, but says his mission in life is to introduce people to art. "They can say I'm a madman, but if they will just listen

— just wait for that connection — it will be clear. They will find art — real art — spiritual art."

For many art enthusiasts, that connection does come from time to time, but is a private, personal experience. For Gray, though, it should be announced to the universe, until somebody hears.

Gray is tempered by his wife, who is as quiet as he is aggressive. Her beliefs, though, are identical to Gray's.

"We opened the gallery in Santa Cruz because the

spiritual identity is here," she said. "I know people are looking for more than rent, food, a car...people are saying, 'I'm more than an animal.'"

"And it's not the money, by God, it's not the money," interjected her husband. "We want people to have art, to stand before it, to put it in their homes and live with it. What's money? These weren't created so some SOB could make some bucks, they were created for the heart — the soul."

"Matisse," he continued, waving his hand in the direction of a lithograph of the artist's work, "used to slash up his paintings with a knife when the groceryman and the landlord came to collect. He would rather destroy his art than let someone like them have it. And he was right. On opening day, I refused, that's right, I refused to sell a man a Dali because I was afraid he wouldn't keep it, that it could be thrown away."

Declining to accept traveling art shows (security and insurance could prevent this anyway), the Grays say their gallery is a split from commercial endeavors, and is a community service.

With their present collection, it will be difficult for the Grays to avoid some commercial success. Their inventory is impressive. Most of the pieces would appeal to a wide audience, and prices are not prohibitive, particularly when fine art is such a sound investment. If they continue to gather works of the same caliber, their business will draw steady local customers as well as patrons from other parts of the state.

Both are extremely proud of the original matting and frames used to display the works. Although a lot of time and expense goes into the imported fabrics for matting and ancient frame construction technique, some matting is overwhelming, too busy for the print, and others are sloppy. The framing, particularly for some of the more stark works, is garish.

Also working against them is the poor location; the gallery is next to a car wash and a furniture store on one of the busiest streets in the county. The former location of a palm reader, it appears the Grays have done little to change the interior of the small home.

A neon blue shaggy carpet reflects horrid light on superb artworks, and outside the traffic roars incessantly. Above it all is Gray's unavoidable baritone, keeping an easy pace with the cars, but not with patrons.

"This is not a peaceful gallery," quipped one customer.

Again, Gray's sincerity, his love affair with art is unquestionable. His tatics with people who would prefer to witness the works in solitude is inappropriate.

What people are willing to go through to view great art up close, right on 41st Avenue, remains the argument. But the noise, confusion and confrontation may simply be too much.