Unique new exhibit at Mills Pond House Gallery in St. James connects art to life

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'Sinking Feeling' by Margaret Minardi. Image from STAC

By Susan Risoli

When the everyday state of things starts to look different, what happens then? Who defines what's "real" and what isn't? Visitors to the Connecting Art to Life exhibit, which opens this Saturday at the Mills Pond House Gallery in St. James, may find themselves asking these questions.

And that's just fine with Smithtown Township Arts Council Executive Director Allison Cruz, who said in a recent interview she hopes the exhibit, which features the work of artists Margaret Minardi and Anthony Freda, will start a conversation about the meeting of life and art.

This is the first time Cruz invited only two artists to be part of a Mills Pond show. She was moved by the determination of these two to keep on expressing themselves through their individual projects. "Anthony and Margaret teach and have families," Cruz said. "Yet they both said to me, 'It doesn't matter how busy I am. I have to make art."

Cruz came up with the show's title Connecting Art to Life, inspired by the ways Freda and Minardi take isolated aspects of daily living and translate that into something to which people can respond. It's a process similar to the purpose of an art space, she said. "I think people are intimidated by the thought of going to an art gallery," Cruz explained, "but really it's a place to get information about what's going on in your world right now." Take it all in, "then do with it what you will."

Margaret Minardi



Artist Margaret Minardi

Margaret Minardi's world changed through her desire to become pregnant. She adopted two children after a personal journey that resulted in an infertility diagnosis. Her series of pieces in the Mills Pond House Gallery show were inspired by Minardi becoming a mother.



'One Nation Under Surveillance,' fiberglass and epoxy, by Anthony Freda. Photo from STAC

The works were rendered in colored pencil some years ago, after she discovered she could no longer use oil paint because she'd become allergic to it. She turned the potential setback into a mission to continue with colored pencil, "even though I didn't know if I could erase, or blend color over color. Hour after hour I practiced." These days, her media include collage and acrylic paint, she said.

Growing up in Trinidad left Minardi with lasting memories of "the specific color of water in the Caribbean." Her pieces on exhibit at the Mills Pond House are done in aquamarine blue, and many of the figures "are in fishtanks, or some water situation." The work juxtaposes realism with expressionism, presenting a story through many layers. The artist invites her viewers to interpret what's going on beneath the surface of her pieces.

Minardi is about to retire after 30 years of teaching drawing and painting in the Northport-East Northport school district. "I've been so lucky," she said. "I get to be around art from the time I wake up until the time I go to sleep." She doesn't always know what a project is going to turn into and is sometimes surprised by the result, she said, "but it's just important that I keep my pencil on the paper at all times. If you keep your hand moving, it becomes something important that comes from deep within."

Anthony Freda

Anthony Freda's 28 pieces in the Mills Pond House Gallery show are collage, his own paintings on found surfaces, limited edition prints and sculpture. As a Mount Sinai resident who grew up in Port Jefferson, he wanted to connect with a local art community and said this show seemed a good way to do it. Freda, an editorial illustrator and adjunct faculty member for the Fashion Institute of Technology, said throughout his career "I try to be honest and think about how I can best represent that with my art."

Freda is drawn to themes of war and peace, freedom, civil liberties and encroachments upon them. "Things that impact society as a whole and impact me personally are things I want to comment on," he said. Bombs, birds, pinup girls, reassuring American ephemera repurposed with contemporary social commentary, all can be found in his work. Humor infuses many of his pieces.

News about current events can be "provocative and emotional," Freda said, and he's trying to bring it all together and process it. "We're all bombarded with memes, and disparate ideas, and news," he said, so people will bring their own ideas when they see his work. Though some people avoid the news, saying it overwhelms them, Freda's commentary continues. "Sometimes the truth is not popular," he said. "Sometimes my work is not popular, but that's almost irrelevant." For him, it's about defining the era he lives in, "in the way I want to define it, while trying to be honest and objective."



'Solution' by Anthony Freda

The Smithtown Township Arts Council's Mills Pond House Gallery, 660 Route 25A, St. James will present Connecting Art to Life from April 22 through May 13. There will be an opening reception April 22 from 2 to 4 p.m. The reception and exhibit are free and open to the public. For more information, call 631-862-6575 or visit www.stacarts.org.

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