

Field works



Plein air artist Lisa Couper paints at Ocean Mist Artichoke Ranch in Salinas. The Monterey Bay Plein Air Painters Association is selling the art from its paint-outs to raise money for the Spiritual Care Center at Natividad Community Hospital.

Plein air artists raise money for Natividad Medical Center

Article & photos by LILY DAYTON
Herald Correspondent

Autumn harvest is always a colorful time in Monterey County. But this year, the fields are ripening with more colors than usual.

Each month throughout the spring, summer and into early fall, local plein air artists have taken brush, canvas and a rainbow of pigments to Monterey County farmlands, where they've set out to document the beauty of the growing season.

The Monterey Bay Plein Air Painters Association (MBPAPA) is wrapping up its final series of paint-outs, organized as a fundraiser for Natividad Medical Center.

Art produced through the paint-outs will be juried and on display at Natividad's next art exhibition, "Plein Air Art: From Field to Fork," opening March 1. Part of Natividad's ongoing project to cover the hospital's wall space with fine art, the paintings will be for sale, with half the money raised benefitting Natividad's Spiritual Care Services.

As another early morning paint-out begins, four artists scramble to assemble their easels alongside a field on Ocean Mist Artichoke Ranch in Salinas. The painters alternate their gaze between splashes of paint they mix on wooden palettes and the verdant rows that

contrast with the surrounding golden hills. Farther down the rows, farmworkers harvest the artichokes, systematically lopping off the silvery buds and tossing them in the red canastas (baskets) they wear on their backs.

"I love the absolutely limitless colors that are here," says Lisa Couper, a resident of Watsonville, who regularly paints in Monterey County. She fans her arms out to encompass the view before her, adding, "There's a rhythm of the mountains and hills and these purple artichokes right here."

Meanwhile, fellow painter Murray Wagon stands at the edge of the field, scratching a sketch of the distant mountains onto his canvas. Within a little over an hour, he'll have a completed painting on the rectangular surface mounted above his easel.

"Being outside is a great thing — and painting outside adds a whole area of problem solving," says Wagon, who grew up in King City and credits the Salinas Valley landscape for much of his artistic inspiration. He explains, "You have to go fast because when the sun moves the lighting changes — so you have to really cook. Today is more forgiving because the light is diffused behind the clouds."

Nearby, Mary Jo Dunn-Ruiz of Santa Cruz has jumped right in to painting her small canvas with a softened image of the field, while Steve Maher of Salinas is working on a pencil sketch of the view in front of him. He'll complete a quick painting in the field to capture the light quality, then take it home later to complete a representational painting in his studio.

"There is an immediacy you get out here with the light, that's really exciting," says Maher, the treasurer for MBPAPA, explaining that creating exhibitions for Natividad is the group's major program.

"This is a great opportunity for us to put our paintings up, so people can appreciate them," he says. "And if we end up selling the paintings, (the hospital) gets a contribution. So we're helping in so many ways."

"It definitely feels like a full circle," says Dunn-Ruiz, applying streaks of ochre paint to her canvas. "To do something and enjoy it, and have it benefit others, feels valuable. It's affirming."

Indeed, as the fieldworkers advance closer to the painters, the circular nature of this project is evident. The spiritual care program, like all

Field Works: Plein air artists raise money for Natividad Medical Center *(cont.)*



Lisa Couper keeps her colors at the ready while painting a landscape at Ocean Mist Artichoke Ranch in Salinas.

the services at Natividad, will likely benefit some of these workers who cut artichokes from thisty stems with the cuchillos (knives) they hold in their gloved hands.

Eighty percent of the patients admitted to Natividad are affiliated with the agricultural industry, says Linda Ford, president and CEO of Natividad Medical Foundation. Ford is responsible for adorning the formerly barren, white walls of the hospital with art. In a project named “Natividad Art: A Journey of Healing,” the entire hospital, from the maternity ward to the cafeteria is filled with multimedia works ranging from paintings and photography to hand-folded origami.

“Art is healing,” says Ford, standing in the hospital before a long hallway that’s painted a vibrant red. “When they come in, we want our patients to be surrounded by beauty.” One of the centerpieces of the “Journey of Healing” project is the red oxide wall, which faces a row of windows and serves as a rotating art exhibit that will display the “Field to Fork” exhibition once it’s unveiled next year.

Ford chose the upcoming exhibition not only to raise money for the hospital, but to give tribute to The Agricultural Leadership Council (TALC), an organization of 102 farmers in the Salinas Valley who have banded together with the mission of improving the health status of farmworkers and their families. Since the group began in 2010, they’ve raised \$600,000 — all of which has gone directly to equipment and services at the medical center.

“Agriculture equals our community,” says Ford. “The art was a way to say thank you to all the members of TALC and showcase their operations.”

Since May, the MBPAPA artists have held paint-outs on farms of the 22 original founding TALC members, depicting a diversity of crops ranging from brussels sprouts and cactus pears to strawberries, lettuces and wine grapes. The culminating exhibition will be previewed to TALC members at a VIP reception prior to the official opening.

While the painters paint and the harvesters fill their baskets, Ford walks down a hallway at Natividad with John D’Arrigo, founder of TALC, to show him the newborn incubators, known as “Pandas,” that TALC has recently purchased for the hospital. In the labor and delivery wing, D’Arrigo wears the expression of a proud grandfather as he reaches his hand out to feel the warming unit that will soon receive a newborn.

“It’s very important to us that we take care of our agricultural workers,” says D’Arrigo.

“We couldn’t survive without the farmworker contribution to this valley. So we see it as a long-term benefit to our work force. And, of course, we want their families to be healthy and happy, also.”

Back in the artichoke field, Mauricio Ortiz, a tractor driver who works for Sea Breeze Harvesting, looks on as the field workers empty their baskets onto the truck bed. “This program is beneficial to the people who work in the field,” he says in Spanish. “You never know when you’re going to need to go to the hospital. ... Art on the walls can distract you when you’re sick.”

“Everyone benefits from this,” adds Dale Huss, vice president of artichoke production for Ocean Mist Farms. “A lot of our employees use Natividad, and so do a lot of other people who live in Monterey County. It’s an extremely important medical center that supports the health needs of the entire county.”

On their way out to reload their canastas, a group of fieldworkers stops for a moment to watch Wagon apply broad strokes of paint to his canvas. One of the men sticks his hand out to give the artist a thumbs up, and then heads back out to the field.

Lily Dayton can be reached at montereybaylily@gmail.com



Murray Wagon’s work must keep pace with the shifting light in the Salinas Valley.



Workers review a work in progress on their way to harvest artichokes.