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"Art of the State" exhibit in Harrisburg.

A large variety of styles in work from across Pa.

By Victoria Donohoe
For The Inquirer

Prominently once a year, a rush of activity ushers some of today's best art made across Pennsylvania into the State Museum adjoining the Capitol.

Now that new theories are broadening the outlook of our nation's art history, regional art that was formerly below the radar of aesthetic interest has become a new frontier. No other event seems to flatten the mountainous divide between our commonwealth's east and west flanks like the "Art of the State" annual juried exhibit, now in its 42d edition. And we welcome it.

The show, for the second consecutive year, attracted more than 2,000 entries, this time from 798 Pennsylvania artists in all media. On display are 157 of those works by 134 artists from 32 counties. Metropolitan areas are represented predictably by dense clusters of talent - Philadelphia with 37 artists, and the four closest counties to it with a total of 29.

Besides strong representations of the human figure, there is an energetic interest in abstraction this year, much more than in 2008. The show also sustains a considerable gravity on serious subjects, while many other artists stay within the limits of the technical knowledge at their disposal.

Cultural primitives are scarce. And the show raises the level of understanding when the subject is nature by celebrating its capacity to touch the human spirit in the exhibit's keynote piece, Richard Bargdill's towering slender figure sculpture *I'm a Tree Chopped Down Everyday*. This piece won first prize for sculpture.

There are juicy paint surfaces in Ellwood Derrick's Harrisburg river scene, whereas in Bargdill's figure and in several paintings about problems of our time - financial and otherwise - there are feeling and thinking.

Jun-Cheng Liu's first-prize oil painting, *Dreamer*, is noteworthy for the evenness of its style, absence of flashiness, and lack of condescension toward the poised young woman he has painted. Philip Lindsey's portrait figure has storytelling ethnic interest and avoids the histrionic; George Strasburger's young couple with babies is warmly felt.

Meanwhile, Allen Capriotti's family group portrait is distilled by a personal vision of what it means to capture people and context.

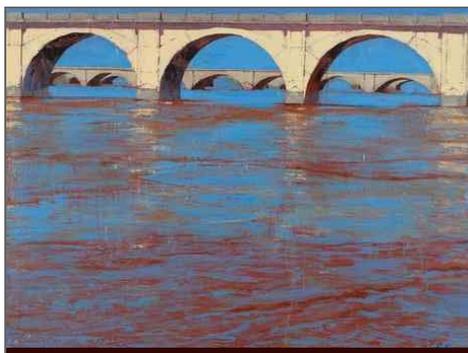
A number of abstractions are tastefully attractive and achieve a rather domesticated elegance. Several of these abstract artists are entirely new to me, and I hope to see their work again. There's a growing sophistication in some of this work and elsewhere in the exhibit, hinted at in one confident artist's titling his painting "homage to" an earlier modern American master.

Pieces stand out here by virtue of their understatement and seem to reflect the steady, unhedging voice of reason. That's readily noted in Peter Van Dyck's subdued room interior in oil, and Matthew Pruden's graphite drawings - their separation from mainstream styles is striking. Lisa Murch's *Amy*, featuring dozens of clay frogs, has quicksilver moments of humor and insight. And kids love it.

Ultimately, the appealing thing about this year's exhibit is its optimism. Artists who lavished hard work and care on pieces shown here clearly believe that life is worthwhile.

Adjoining rooms offer a welcome opportunity to trace the rapid growth of the permanent collection of artworks given to this museum from 1998 to 2008, in a lively and very gratifying show, "The Fine Art of Giving," which continues to June 30, 2010.

State Museum of Pennsylvania, 300 North St., Harrisburg (next to Capitol). To Sept. 20. Tue.-Sat. 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. noon-5 p.m. Adults \$3. Free every 3d Saturday. 717-783-9911.



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