

Ethereal beauty at heart of Hostetler Gallery

By Anna Popnikolova

Contributing Writer

It is my first time browsing the Hostetler Gallery. I become enamored with a small painting of a lemon-powdered donut.

The donut is bitten in half, translucent yellow curd and powdered sugar smeared across the canvas. It is so lifelike, I'm ready to reach out and sink my teeth into the image.

"Aren't those fun? I thought the gallery needed something a little more fun," gallery owner Susan Hostetler says, coming up behind me.

The mouthwatering dessert display, done by Luke Boyd, is unlike anything else in the gallery – but everything in the gallery is unlike anything else. Hostetler Gallery, nestled at 42 Centre St., is an enchanted forest of art.

The slender, graceful sculptures of David Hostetler, Susan Hostetler's late husband, are the gallery's touchstone. The long-limbed wood and brass human forms greet visitors by the door, like quiet hosts at a great dinner party.

The sculptor moved to the island in the late 1970s and started the gallery in the early 1980s as a way to display his artwork. Susan Hostetler began running the gallery for him in the late 1980s, and has done so ever since.

David Hostetler's work is still the gallery's focus, this season more than ever, Susan said, but she also makes an effort to diversify the space.

"I want it to feel like there are lots of choices and materials and colors," she said.

Choices there are. The walls last week were lined with the work of Alyssa Fortin, who held the gallery's most recent opening July 24. Fortin's photography of professional ballerinas under water is otherworldly.

The photographer is fascinated with the fragility of the human body and the environment, but her ballerinas are not fragile, they are sirens.

"When I first saw them," Hostetler said, clutching her chest, "I thought, 'oh, this is so stunning and evocative.' I mean, each one has its own emotional story. I just didn't want to stop looking at them."

Next to Fortin's work are Adi Oren's brilliantly absurd free divers. They are set against beautiful, apocalyptic skies, pop-art backgrounds of hot pink, neon green, aqua blue and butter yellow.

Oren's little divers are spread-eagle on the canvas, grayscale bodies in swim caps and one-piece bathing suits. They are so different from their backdrops they look like magazine clippings. In most of her work, there is no water in sight.

"It was this little square on my phone," Hostetler said, pinching her index finger and thumb an inch apart, indicating the size of Oren's work when she first came across it. "And I thought this is going to be fabulous."

Oren works in ink and acrylic on canvas, and her opening will be held at 7 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 7 at the gallery.

"They are even juicier in person. There's a richness to her palette and a richness to her figures. Are they going to land? But you don't think about that. You think about how you'd feel in the air like that," Hostetler said.

I think she is fascinated with inversions. Her gallery is full of them. What happens when you submerge a dancer? Do they stay a dancer? Do they stay dancing?

What happens when you put a diver in the sky? What does it mean, putting a huge frosted cake on the wall, so lifelike you can practically taste the sugar, but knowing you can never eat it?

Is there a pool, a lake, an ocean, just out of our sight, where the diver will land?

I get the impression that Hostetler does not show art in her gallery that she is not in love with. Every artist makes her eyes glaze over with excitement, with adoration. This passion for art makes her exceedingly pleasant to talk to.

"I have an artistic bent. I love design, always noticed architecture, furniture, paintings, I always had that interest," she said. "I met Bianca Bosker and she said she just couldn't understand art, buying art, and I said, I'm the total opposite. I can see it."

She uses her hands while speaking, painting pictures in the empty air with her hands. I am fixated on the wide-headed bone ring on her right hand, and the effortless fashion of her silk top.

"Do you know scientists have studied what makes a cool person?" she asked me at one point in the conversation, rather suddenly. "They went all over the world, and even in different countries, the factors that make cool people are the same," she said. "I think, coolness is a human condition."

I never get around to asking her what the factors actually are. She locks up the gallery as the sun thinks about the horizon. I think I know. We walk up Orange Street as she heads to a concert. I ask her how she can tell if she likes a piece of art.

"It really speaks to my heart. Art has to just make me go . . ." she sighs deeply, with her whole chest, "That's what I want to feel. Sometimes I don't even know why it's beautiful."

Hostetler Gallery, 42 Centre St. (740) 591-8180, www.hostetlergallery.com



Adi Oren's "Blue, Teal and Yellow Diver."



David Hostetler's "Dancing Lady"