

Art from down on the farm

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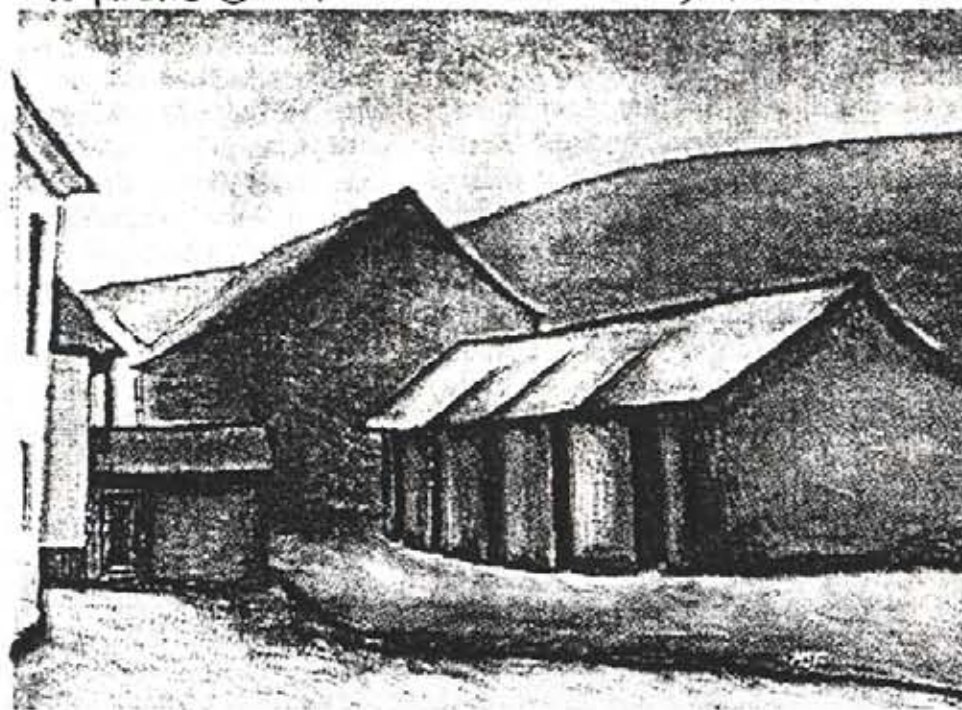
By MARIANNE SHAUGHNESSY
Contributing Writer

BRATTLEBORO — Marcia Steckler doesn't know why she's attracted to farm-related subjects for her paintings.

"I can only paint what speaks to me, whatever seems to need to be seen," Steckler said. "If you give me a weathered window or a stack of logs, I'll probably paint it."

A cornfield in winter and an old farm tool are two oil-on-canvas paintings that Steckler has on exhibit in "The Farm Show," a month-long exhibit opening today at the Windham Art Gallery in conjunction with the Strolling of the Heifers event this weekend in Brattleboro.

The paintings, prints, drawings and photographs of 45 regional artists will be on display and put up for silent auction with the proceeds to support the educational programs of Strolling of the Heifers. The third annual celebration recognizes the importance agriculture plays in the daily lives of the community. The event features three days of hometown style festivities featuring cows, farmers,



FARM ART — "Farm Neighborhood" by **Melissa Scheid Frantz** is one of many paintings on exhibit at the Windham Art Gallery in Brattleboro, part of the Strolling of the Heifers celebration. Scheid Frantz paints almost entirely with her fingers.

artists, musicians and farm fresh cuisine. The exhibit and the bidding will begin during Gallery Walk Friday evening with an opening reception at the gallery at 5:30, hosted by Strolling of the Heifers.

According to Ralph DeAnna, the curator at the museum, this

is one of the most ambitious exhibits the small gallery on Main Street has hosted, featuring works by gallery members as well as by artists outside the gallery. With 65 works, the exhibit will be an impressive floor to ceiling display, DeAnna said.

"Anyone who has painted

landscape in Vermont has probably painted a farm," he said. "It's pretty impressive to see a farm in operation. It's very different from the clichéd version. We're hoping artists will reveal aspects of farm life that goes deeper than people's pre-conceived ideas. It's why we're all here, but it's hidden from the community. This exhibit is an opportunity for us to acknowledge the contribution farming has made to our art and our lives."

Steckler, of Brattleboro, shares that fascination with tools and times gone by. "If there's aging wood or rusting metal, I've got it in a painting," Steckler said. "There is something about their place in the life we've chosen. It says something about work ethic."

Steckler began painting five years ago after the death of her mother-in-law, a skilled portrait painter. Although she'd never taken an art class in her life, Steckler kept her mother-in-law's brushes and paints, in part to keep them in the family. She then decided to attend classes at the River Gallery School in Brat-

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just to paint.

"I've got to paint," she said. "It feeds me, it energizes me. It's a source of great satisfaction."

Steckler only recently started showing her work after people told her of the powerful reactions they've had to her paintings. Usually she gives her work away

rather than sell it, but, she said, she was happy to offer her paintings for The Farm Show fundraiser to honor the River Gallery School founder Ric Campman.

Where Steckler sees history, Brattleboro painter Scott Nelson sees conflict in the agricultural landscape. Rather than the usual pastoral settings, he tends toward the quirky, he said.

"I'm not comfortable with a scene without conflict," he said. "It's part of what I feel. The small farmer in America is an endangered specie, and what I'm reflecting in my work is that it's not all sweetness and light. There's always an element of danger — something not expected."

He described a piece he did 25 years ago titled "Farming at Earth's Edge" with a patterned landscape at the edge of the ocean and a skeletal image intruding on the landscape.

"It's a piece I've always liked maybe because of the 'thing' intruding," he said, adding that he is anxious to see how his new piece fits in the show.

A six-year member of Windham Art Gallery, Nelson said he likes being part of a community of artists that feeds off each other. "We see each other's work on a month-to-month basis and it

affects us, even though we might not admit it," he said. "It's different from being part of a gallery with an owner who decides. Here the members are the curators of the shows and it's a different person each month."

Like Nelson, Simi Berman of Brattleboro sees beyond the pastoral to the odd relationship between humans and animals. This relationship has been the focus of her work, which she describes as whimsical and with serious humor — humor with a bite.

The two pieces she is offering for the fund-raiser are of paintings on gessoed wood of mythical beasts that emerged out of farm animals. "One of them is a rooster who can hardly believe his own splendor and the other is a long-suffering sheep who keeps slogging along," Berman said.

These paintings represent a departure from the painted terracotta figures that Berman exhibited across the country for 25 years. First, she began doing line drawings and watercolors that were similar in spirit and that she turned into prints and cards. Then not too long ago, she took a painting class in art and meditation with Barbara Campman at the River Gallery School.

"It opened a magic door to un-

known places," Berman said. Instead of creating according to plan, she said, things just appeared. "It is a wonderful thing. There is so much surprise and unpredictability."

Melissa Scheid Frantz, too, has been exploring different techniques in her painting as her piece in The Farm Show will reveal. "Farm Neighborhood" was inspired, she said, by her visits to the rural areas of China and Vermont and the similarities she saw across the different lands. It was painted using her index finger in vibrant colors, which is a distinguishing feature of her work, with oils on paper.

Frantz said she has been painting with her finger — in a latex glove — for a long time, turned on to it at the River Gallery School. In fact, she said she can't remember when she last used a brush. With her finger, she said, she is able to feel closer to the subject matter and the paint, creating strokes, angles and shapes that she wouldn't be able to do with a brush.

Frantz said she found her style after a trip in 2001 to China, where her husband, who used to lead groups to the country, showed her the different regions.

"I was struck by the architecture, the land and the history," Frantz said. "I painted images of China for the next two or three years from photos or adapting images from my trip."

Then she started painting from other trips, including one to Vietnam, her mother's birth country, where she met relatives.

"All my new work is based on that trip," Frantz said. "Overall, I'm more of a landscape painter. I always look for interesting angles and shapes in the land. The colors are based on the emotion I have at the time."

Curator DeAnna said that as the exhibit sponsor Windham Art Gallery is happy to host The Farm Show and to support the aims of Strolling of the Heifers. He said he hopes the event will benefit the gallery as well by attracting new artist members and in attracting the community in terms of volunteers. The Farm Show will also benefit the artists by giving them an opportunity to connect with the community.

"We're telling all the farmers to come," he said.

The Farm Show at the Windham Art Gallery will be exhibited, June 4-27, 69 Main St., Brattleboro. 802-257-1881.



"Emptying the Sky" a landscape by William Hays that is part of "The Farm Show" at the Windham

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