

Timeless Beauty

An exhibit travels back in time

Walking into the Bert Gallery simulates what it might feel like to walk around in a time capsule. Cathy Bert, the gallery's owner, has created another interesting exhibition that combines beauty, history and the role of archives for public consumption. In "Up and Coming in the 1940s," we gaze at work submitted for an annual juried exhibition held at the RISD Museum in the 1940s. Even though the work is over half a century old, there is a sense of timelessness captured by these artists, and despite never being formally addressed, this exhibit also shows us what was happening in Rhode Island while the rest of the world was faced with war and reconstruction.

Bert worked with the archives department at RISD to get information about the juried shows sponsored by the museum during the '40s since one of Bert's own artist, Louise Marianetti, submitted work for several of these exhibitions. The programs from 1940 to 1943 do not mention individual works by artists; instead they just list of all participants in the show. By the end of the decade, these programs evolved into listings of titles of works, artist names and prices. Without this information, the exhibition at Bert Gallery would not have happened. The value of archives, though sometimes underestimated, is undoubtedly priceless.

There are no examples of abstract expressionism, which was pioneered by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning during the 1940s. Cathy noted that this exhibition is a snapshot of these artists' careers and soon some of these painters' would start to move towards abstraction.

This exhibition also brings attention to the role that RISD has had in bringing in out-of-town jurors, allowing participating artists to have their work seen by those more experienced in the art world. There are influences of surrealism, photo-realism and modernism in the exhibit. These different elements show that Providence was not completely isolated from the rest of the art community during this time.

A standout in this show is a street scene of downtown Providence from 1944 by Hope Smith. This is the only piece representing that year or our city. Smith's style captures a sense of emptiness in the city that may represent not just a time of day in Providence, but what the city must have felt like during World War II. Another highlight of the exhibition is the work by the woman who inspired the research for this show: Louise Marianetti. Her realistic still lifes stand out from the rest of the show due to her subject matter and skill. She was also one of the younger artists participating in the exhibit; she was 25 during her first show in 1941.

Bringing recognizable people from New England's art community to Rhode Island to select work to hang in this annual show is still a stressful point for artists. We tend to overlook how brave one must be in order to have strangers judge his or her work, but risks to an artist's ego must be taken in order to reap the great reward of professional exposure. This gallery show may not be full of contemporary artists, but it does give proof to the fact that great talent has always resided in this state.