



HOLLY VAN HART

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Solo Exhibition: Possibilities Abound

Triton Museum of Art
1505 Warburton Avenue
Santa Clara, CA 95050
www.tritonmuseum.org

November 23, 2014 - February 14, 2015



INTRODUCTION: 'Hoping for the Possible' by Preston Metcalf

Hope. It was an interesting word to keep coming up in the jurying process of an art competition. Not a word one would expect to be the focus of so much discussion, and, yes, excitement, particularly in reference to a submitted painting. To be sure, there were other words in play that day – technique, style, skill, media, etc. – but it was the word hope that captured our attention as we stood arrested before the work of Holly Van Hart, and one painting in particular, Possibilities Abound.

The “we” in question were the Curatorial team of the Triton Museum of Art: Preston Metcalf, María Ester Fernández, and Stephanie Learmonth. Every year the Triton Museum of Art hosts a statewide art competition, the focus changing from year to year. This year it was a general painting competition, all painting media, styles, and themes open. It was a big competition that year, with more than 900 entries, out of which about 80 were selected for inclusion in the exhibition. The works were in and the show was installed, ready for the opening reception two days later. Now was the moment of truth. The Best of Show, place winners, and honorable mentions are not selected in the Triton competitions during the selection process. We wait until the work is on the wall and lit for exhibition so that we can give each piece a most favorable viewing before determining awards. So it was when each of the jurors came face to face with Possibilities Abound.

We, the jurors, had already been dazzled by still lifes of striking detail and realism; landscapes that were exquisitely rendered; portraiture of amazing realism and expressionism; and abstractions of powerful emotion and mystery, but it was Possibilities Abound, a painting of a nest with three eggs nestled inside, that kept drawing us back.

Possibilities Abound

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

First Place, California Statewide Painting Competition



What was it about this painting that compelled us so? This deceptively simple work of a nest, cast somewhat to the edge of the canvas was, first of all, well-rendered. The brush execution was loose and confident, with color and texture suggesting as often as it explicitly portrayed. The use of color and texture was lively and engaging.

The composition was simple, the asymmetrical positioning of the nest adding interest to our view, but none of these, alone or together are what set this particular work apart. It was that one word ... *hope*.

While each of the jurors were impressed with the evident skill of Holly Van Hart, it was the powerful infusion of meaning into this otherwise simple composition that made it impossible for us to ignore. The cradled eggs would seem to be the vehicle for the perceived meaning of this work, but that is not the case. It is the nest itself, twigs and sticks intertwined, no single strand revealing its ultimate connection to the others, yet connected they all are. And in these concealed and revealed connections, the jurors (each of us quite independently) came away with the feeling that we are not to identify with the eggs, the seeming vessels of opportunity, but that we are each metaphorically a strand or twig that combines with our fellow beings to find the opportunities that abound when we realize that we are all connected, like the twigs of a nest, and that together we nurture both our potentialities and the potential hopes for those that will follow. This painting was, after all, about us!

Opportunity

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

In this exhibition you will see more than nests. Ribbons tumble and weave, touching, supporting, spinning away and into its fellow strands, just like the twigs of a nest, which are – we believe – but suggestions of our human connectedness. In other works, branches and leaves create a visual net wherein this same message is revealed. It is work that is powerful in its simplicity and message of human connectivity.

Thousands of people visited the Triton Museum of Art's Statewide Painting Competition exhibition and saw Holly's work. Did they see what we saw? Will they see it now? We can only hope.

Preston Metcalf is Chief Curator at the Triton Museum of Art, and art history educator at Mission College, San Jose City College, and the Triton Museum of Art.

Swirl of Life
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches



Flush With Possibilities

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches





Possibilities in Full Color
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

Unlimited Possibilities

Oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches





Nestled

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

HOLLY VAN HART: Possibilities Abound

by DeWitt Cheng

The 'presence' of Rembrandt's portraits was in paint, in the very act of moving his hand and conveying his energy to bring these figures to life. These figures were personage and paint. Rembrandt transmits his own energy, his own life, in the act of making a brushstroke. — Painter/printmaker/sculptor Nathan Oliveira, who was inspired to become an artist by a Rembrandt portrait at San Francisco's Legion of Honor.

In the hurly-burly of the contemporary art scene, the various aesthetic battles of the past—drawing vs. color, representational vs. abstract, socially engaged vs. formalist—have in recent years been joined by a new one—modernists vs. postmodernists, or, those who claim that art has a transcendent meaning vs. those who see it as socially and politically subservient. This latest dichotomy often resolves into those who make objects, and are emotionally invested in them, and those who take a more conceptual, distanced stance, employing appropriation or hiring crafts people and technicians to do the work. Like all previous battles, the current schism is somewhat exaggerated by its partisans. I remember getting into trouble in graduate school in the 1980s for questioning the hard and fast lines drawn between modernism and postmodernism on a bullet-pointed class handout, so I was gratified to learn recently of the latest thing, Metamodernism, a synthesis of the two. (Being old-fashioned and prescient are often so close.)



Abundance
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

In this context, the paintings of Holly Van Hart are firmly on the personal, modernist, poetic side of that temperamental and philosophic divide: they're oil paintings on canvas, in a tradition dating to the 15th century; they're both representational and abstract; and they express—well, let Georgia O'Keefe say it, succinctly: "found that I couldn't say any other way — things I had no words for." Van Hart's paintings, Romantic/expressionist depictions of birds' nests enclosing eggs, are clearly symbolic, and thus out of step with the contemporary fashion for ironic dispassion, even surrender or nihilism.

Van Hart's optimism derives in part from her long and successful career in industrial engineering and operations research in Silicon Valley, with its "unique culture of creativity and unrelenting optimism ... a place where anything is possible." At the same time, she "pursued painting passionately as a hobby – taking many classes, reading hundreds of books, forming an art critique group, and painting every spare minute." A few years ago, "absorbed and inspired by the idea of the limitless opportunities we have in our lives ... and the promise of our own capabilities, to be nurtured and explored and stretched to their fullest potential," Van Hart became a full-time artist. These works about potential and metamorphosis, then, are clearly autobiographical, but they're also universal (as the deepest, most personal work often is, paradoxically). The next-generation optimism, which is a deep part of American culture, is tempered, however, here: the woven twigs and branches of the nests—painted from the imagination—look spiky and slightly blurred, as if windblown, and the eggs, if not in obvious danger, remain unprotected. In a recent interview she said, "I want the nests' texture to be a reminder of things unseen ... nature always has that underside. There are predators around, and nests blow out of trees; things happen." One can see the nest as shelter, burrow, surrogate womb—or as a crown of thorns.

If the images can be interpreted variously, according to the mood of the viewer, Van Hart's hard-won painterly skills are undeniable and compelling. Her naturalistic yet symbolic paintings—"Nestled," "Opportunity," "Swirl of Life," "Larger Than Life" and "Dream Weaver," the last two, featuring nests made with red ribbon interlaced with the branches, based on a childhood memory)—present their enigmatic subjects with both beauty and conviction, memorably. Several paintings featuring blossoms and branches set against light-filled skies—"Flush with Possibilities," "Outside my Window," "Springing"—seem to suggest, rightly or not, an Asian influence—not impossible, considering the cosmopolitan culture mix here on the Pacific Rim, or Van Hart's previous professional globe-hopping across six continents. A new, photorealistic painting, "Posh," depicts the familiar motif of eggs, here set amid loops of colored ribbons, with everything brightly illuminated, floating in a dark blue space. Natural and manmade elements are equally endowed with secret meaning and life.

In the current art climate, dominated by arcane, theory-driven conceptual art on the one hand and facile art-fair gimmickry on the other, Van Hart's subjectivity and poetry may seem retrograde to some; to others, myself included, it presages, we hope, art's return to meaning and self-expression, guided by disciplined craftsmanship and perpetual self-examination. Van Hart writes, "Each painting is a journey, requiring many layers of oil paint, and much inspection and introspection over a period of months." Nathan Oliveira, quoted above, reminisced about studying in 1950 with one of his idols, the German expressionist Max Beckmann. The older painter's English was rudimentary, so he advised the young Californian through his English-speaking wife: a painting life, he warned, probably with perverse pride, was "Sweat, much sweat."

DeWitt Cheng is an art writer for Art Ltd, Artillery, ARTnews, and Visual Art Source, and curator at Stanford Art Spaces.



Dream Weaver
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches



Soft Start
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Outside My Window

Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

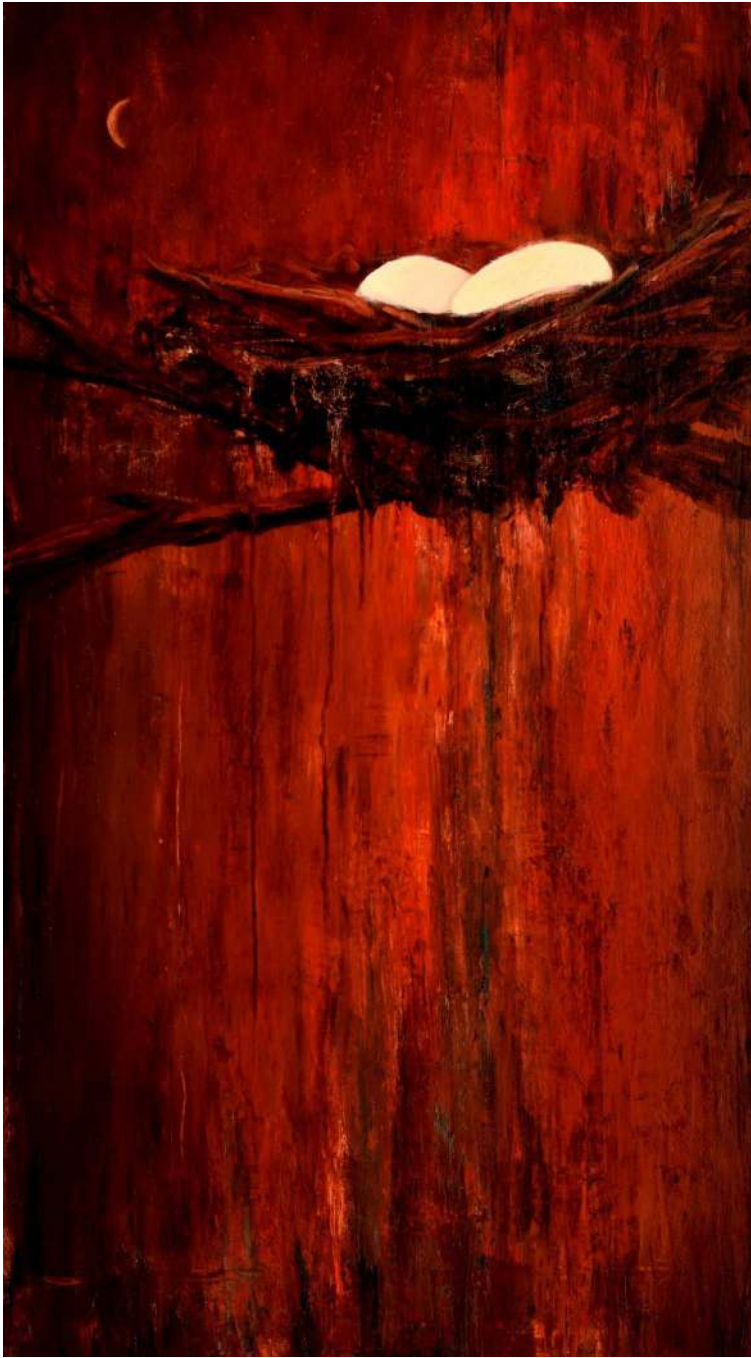


Serenity

Oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches



Holly Van Hart



HOLLY VAN HART

Lives and works in Silicon Valley, California

EDUCATION

Stanford University, M.S.

Rutgers University, B.S.

Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA

Pacific Art League, Palo Alto, CA

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2015 Solo Exhibition: *Serenity*, University of California, San Francisco, CA

2014 Solo Exhibition: *Possibilities Abound*, Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA
Sandra Lee Gallery, Real and Surreal Exhibition, San Francisco, CA

2013 Triton Museum of Art, Statewide Painting Competition Exhibition, Santa Clara, CA

2009 California State Fair Painting Exhibition, Sacramento, CA

2009 Artfest, Mountain View, CA

2008 Menlo Art League, Annual Competition, Menlo Park, CA

2008 University Art, Juried Competition, San Jose, CA,

2007 Santa Clara Valley Watercolor Society, Annual Exhibition, Santa Clara, CA

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Interview by John Seed, Huffington Post, November 2014

"Possibilities Abound for Artist Holly Van Hart", Santa Clara Weekly, October 2014

Interview by Sally Rayn, Talk Art Cable TV, February 2014

"Painting Without Pause", San Jose Mercury News, January 2014

SELECTED AWARDS

1st Place, 2013 California Statewide Painting Competition, Juror: Preston Metcalf

2009 California State Fair "Award of Merit", Juror: Jack Ogden

2009 Artfest Blue Ribbon "Award of Excellence", Juror: Dale Laitinen

Nest at Night

Oil on canvas, 36 x 18 inches

Cover: **Celebration**, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

References for DeWitt Cheng's article

First paragraph - Nathan Oliveira, *A Survey Exhibition, 1957-1983*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, p.12

Last sentence - Peter Selz, *Nathan Oliveira*, University of California press, p. 21

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