

ART OF LIVING

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Reviewing Southeast Texas' best art shows of 2023

By **Andy Coughlan**
CONTRIBUTOR

It's that time of the year when critics compile their best-of-the-year lists. Not wishing to break with tradition, here are a few of my favorites from 2023. These are in chronological order. As usual, the list could have been twice as long, and that doesn't even count to excellent shows to be found just up the road in Houston. Let's get to it.

James C. Watkins: "Reflections Made of Memories"
Art Museum of Southeast Texas

AMSET kicked off the year in style, with a terrific ceramics exhibition that featured not only great art, but also allowed us to share in the artist's process. Visitors who attended Watkins' gallery talk were rewarded with anecdotes that gave us insight into his history. Watkins has traveled extensively, and the pots reflect the influence of his travels. The large cauldrons are im-

pressively large. The double wall technique he developed gives them a light touch. Watkins' laser cut porcelain tiles feature drawings inspired by looking through the kiln's peephole. The vibrant colors draw us deep into the flame. An excellent way to start 2023.

Anna Myers: "Umbra"
The Art Studio, Inc.

TASI's Maudee Carron Gallery hosted Myers weird and wonderful creatures in February. Myers' monochrome drawings are fabulously detailed and are a mix of delight and unease, quite appropriate for an alien-inspired landscape. Whether they are dreamscapes or nightmares is up to the viewer. "Umbra" also featured soft-sculptures of Myers' creatures. The exhibition was technically impressive, delightfully imaginative and not without a heavy undertone of whimsy.

Kailee Viator Batson: "Light Weavers"

Iron Gate Studios

Viator has exhibited her mixed-media creations and paintings before, but for the past five years, she has been honing her artistic skills as a tattoo artist. "Light Weavers" saw her return to the gallery with a collection of "journals." Batson uses the books to create elaborate collaged pages that explode with ideas. All manner of objects and images burst from each volume. The work is intriguing, visually appealing, and fun.

Margaret Smithers-Crump: "Kinship"
Art Museum of Southeast Texas

The gallery was filled with large sculptures that reflected the delicate ecological balance the world faces. The works look fragile, as if a stray breath would bring them down, yet they are quite durable as they are constructed with recycled plastics and plexiglass. The oceanic section's sculptures resemble plankton. On the

terrestrial section, "Breaking Point" resembles floating molecules — large manifestations of the microcosm that makes up the natural world. "Kinship" was the perfect blend of visual beauty and activism.

Frank Cricchio: "A Life in Photography"
Museum of the Gulf Coast

Cricchio's portraits are synonymous with Southeast Texas, from proms to pageants to weddings. This exhibition offered a fascinating insight to the influence he had beyond the studio. Cricchio was internationally respected for his techniques, winning multiple awards for his teaching, even earning an award from the International Photographic Council, a United Nations NGO. Kodak, Fuji and Polaroid hired him to test their film. "A Life in Photography" was a portrait of the man behind the portraits.

Cathy Spence: "Minimal"
Dishman Art Museum
COVID was a bad thing,

we can all agree on that, but it does seem to have inspired artists to experiment with a variety of styles. Spence's wonderful photo exhibit was born from her solitary walks to escape the tedium of lockdown. The photos capture moments in time between day and night, between seasons. The small photos have an expansive quality, atmospheric landscapes that would not be out of place in an epic 70mm movie by David Lean. A truly lovely exhibition.

Kim Brent: "i2eye"
The Art Studio, Inc.

Kim Brent is a familiar face around Southeast Texas as photographer for The Beaumont Enterprise. What a delight to see another side of her creativity. Brent's paintings are abstract, figurative, lively, colorful, fascinating and truthful. Brent considers herself self-taught, but she intuitively understands what makes a good composition. Brent's menagerie of distorted creatures and people has a lovely whimsical, one might even say naïve, quality, but there is a depth to them beneath which is a philo-

sophical soul.

Shawne Major: "Force Majeure and Other Compulsions"
The Art Museum of Southeast Texas

I know I said I was not ranking the shows on this list, but "Force Majeure" may be my favorite Southeast Texas show of the year. Major's large collages are a compulsive's dream. Composed of all manner of objects, wires, jewelry — basically just stuff — the works bombard us with colorful images that reach out and grab us by the scruff of the neck. We are compelled to get closer, to examine every inch. And we look deeper it is as if we could almost fall into them. Not content with the marvelous collages, Major has also given us highly detailed drawings of segments of the collages. There's fun to be had trying to find the complementary pairs.

If are filled with a sense of FOMO after reading what you missed out on, you've only yourself to blame. Southeast Texas has a vibrant arts scene, so don't miss out. I'll see you there.



Photos by Andy Coughlan/Beaumont Enterprise

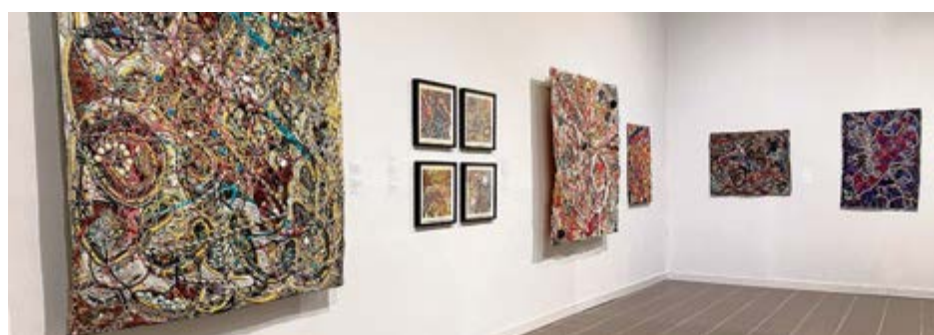
Pages from one of Kailee Viator Batson's mixed media works at Iron Gate Studios.



Kim Brent: "i2eye" The Art Studio, Inc.



"Frank Cricchio; A Life in Photography" at the Museum of the Gulf Coast.



"Storm Major: Force Majeure and Other Compulsions" at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas.



Anna Myers: "Umbra" The Art Studio, Inc.



Margaret Smithers-Crump: "Kinship" Art Museum of Southeast Texas.



Cathy Spence's photos in her exhibition "Liminal" at the Dishman Art Museum.



"Reflections Made of Memories" by James C. Watkins at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas.