

Rich harvest of farm-fresh art in Ashburnham

By Michael Hartwell

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ASHBURNHAM -- The North Country Sustainability Center opened a new art show Saturday that draws inspiration from agriculture and the beauty of the natural world.

The small show, «On the Farm,» features works of art in multiple forms by local artists hung along the main highway of the old school building.

«The show is essentially about farming and nature,» said Justin McGonigle of Ashburnham. He contributed several paintings along with a 17th century period-authentic wooden rake he built while working at historical reenactment site Plimoth Plantation.

The wooden tines of the rake are brown with caked-on mud. McGonigle regularly uses it on the topsoil of his own garden and said the construction is hearty and robust. He said the idea to keep the dirt intact was suggested by other artists in the show.

A trio of paintings by McGonigle feature the same composition: a large oval-shaped seed suspended over a blank plane. He said he can see the evolution of his craft in the subtle texture differences between the pieces, which were created between 2000 and 2010.

«I see it as a symbol,» said McGonigle. «I can see how I've grown as an artist.» He had a fourth seed painting in the same format but previously sold it.

Greta Chirco contributed a painting of blooming fields formed where two round hills meet, resulting in a checkered patchwork.

«This incorporates my love of textiles,» said Chirco, who is new to painting. She has a background in doll-making and quilting and also contributed three cloth dolls to the collection.

The dolls start out as white muslin, a cotton fabric. Once sewn, they are painted a mild sunburn shade, stained to hold the color and dressed. One of the dolls is an anthropomorphic pig holding a bucket of beans. The ears are simple flaps of cloth held stiff by the paint.

Richard Membrino of Ashburnham contributed several carved walking sticks he built along with an abstract painting inspired by family farms he created in 1974.

The painting had been sold and passed through the hands of four different collectors. Membrino said two weeks ago the last collector, now in her 90s, is reducing her collection and offered to give it back to him.

«I said 'Wow, this is going to be a good fit,' » recalled Membrino. He said he started the painting with no preconceptions, but as his lines fell into place he let the idea of a farm guide him.

The piece is entirely abstract. According to Membrino, a large black orb near the top represents the sun and a slanted grid on the left side represents carefully-planned fields. Other intersecting lines

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around the piece show the chaotic nature of the land bent to serve human needs.

The art show is on display Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. «On the Farm» will be up until Sept. 8.

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