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A Frame Of Reverence

Variety and quality come together at the Winfield.

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By C. K. Smith

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The Winfield Gallery on Dolores Street in Carmel doesn't specialize in any particular theme or style, and not every artwork will appeal to every visitor. What the Winfield's artists have in common is something that is hard to find: a serious commitment to art that is both well-crafted and authentically expressive.

One important trend in the art world today is the digital manipulation of photographs. The works of New York-based Danish photographer Torkil Gudnadson offer a striking example of such work. His photographs of botanical silhouettes are visual adventures in perceptual transformation. Flower stalks become monumental obelisks; photographs are digitally printed onto heavy rag paper once reserved for watercolors. (This kind of print, called giclee, comes from the French word for spray.) The effect is dazzling.

Near Gudnadson's photographs, in the gallery's entrance hallway, are three untitled wood engravings by one of the Winfield's newest artists, Carmel jeweler Byron Aatto. A dramatic silent-movie atmosphere suffuses these small scenes with a dark and elegant unease.

In the center of the spacious, sunlight-filled main room are several sizable sculptures, anchors around which the rest of the gallery revolves. One corner of the room is devoted to the ceramic artworks of Karen Shapiro. Her "pop icon" subjects may appear silly, yet each piece is exquisitely crafted; the work's humor or irony is secondary to its status as a beautiful object. A disposable product such as a can of shaving cream is shown to bear the delicate, lacy cracks associated with fine, old porcelain.

Last spring, owner Chris Winfield moved his business into a new gallery, a move that increased available space from 650 to 3,000 square feet. His new gallery has a pleasantly rambling feel, and the placement of the art has an impact on how one experiences it. This is certainly the case with Mari Kloeppel's "Churuka," a fascinating portrait of a malevolent crow. I like that the old bird seems to be proudly lurking in his own out-of-the-way corner.

A raised area just beyond Winfield's desk features some of his own handsome abstract paintings, meditations on color and shadow that push geometry to its expressive limits. Also here is one of the gallery's most beautiful artworks, which is also one of the easiest to miss. It is a small bowl on the ground by ceramist Tony Marsh. Taught by Carmel High School teacher Lloyd Baskerville, Marsh is presently an art professor himself at Long Beach State. His bowl is like a ceramic haiku of the sea, a white whisper that contains a tidepool's endless shapes and sounds.

Interspersed amidst works by living, often local artists is art by such past masters as Diebenkorn and Miro. Also notable are the estate works of California watercolorists Millard Sheets and S.C. Yuan. Sheets was a colleague and friend of Paul Whitman, whose works are currently showing at the Monterey Museum of Art; Yuan's paintings were recently on view at the Hartnell Gallery, in Salinas.

One more area, an alcove towards the rear of gallery, contains further evidence of lively contemporary artistry. In "Fractal 97," Tracey Adams deploys quilt-like squares as a kind of artistic code. Her unique visual language is sophisticated yet accessible, even homey, yielding a feeling of comfort that is honest, not kitschy or mass-produced.

Not every artwork here will be to everyone's liking, yet what emerges from a visit to the Winfield is a sense of art that is alert to the world, art that is curious about its own transformative possibilities. What you won't find here is the kind of art Winfield calls "science projects," those cryptic constructions undoubtedly fascinating to the artist, and perhaps to tired critics who declare that painting and sculpture are "finished." It's easy to get lost amidst such pronouncements, especially when thatched cottages and golf monuments are also blocking the way. In such a world, the Winfield is an island of good taste and hard work, a place where one wants to linger.

The Winfield Gallery is located on Dolores between Ocean and 7th in Carmel. Open seven days a week. Call 624-3369 for hours.