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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

From Russia, With Love

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by Forest Romm, staff writer

Walking into the Elizabeth Holden building on a Wednesday night is often an underwhelming experience. There may be one or two bedraggled art students scratching fervently at a canvas or yawning into their fists; possibly a crew member is doing a final surveillance to ensure that everything is locked up for the night, or perhaps the light has been turned off and you are forced to work on your project in complete darkness. However, if you were to stumble into the gallery during the week of Sept. 24, you would find yourself orbiting in an enchanting landscape of color and shape. The Holden Gallery is filled floor to ceiling and appears to overflow with the vibrant colors and characters that inhabit the work of Vadim Bora, whose landscapes, sculptures, drawings, and hand-made jewelry transport the viewer into his prolific imagination.



Constance Richards, the wife of the late Vadim Bora, helped selected pieces of his work to display in Holden. Photo by Josh Reiss

Vadim Bora, a Russian native and longtime Asheville resident, devoted his life to the freedom of self-expression through art. Bora died last January and his wife, Constance Richards, has selected pieces of his work and put together a dazzling retrospective exhibit that opened last Friday, Sept. 28. The exhibit was not only in homage to the life and achievement of Bora but an attempt to expose his work to a wider audience. With Dusty Benedict, a recently retired art professor at Warren Wilson, Richards assembled a body of work that solicited attention from the entire North Carolina community.

Richards, also an artist and freelance writer, wanted to exhibit work from her late husband's collection that would exemplify the Russian concept of "iskra," which is the initial spark or birth of an idea. With that in mind she and Benedict, a close friend, searched through Bora's work to identify clues that would lead them to the final works chosen for the exhibition.

"I looked for works where I could find the underlying sketch or concept...be it on a post-it or a torn scrap of paper... so that it could accompany the finished piece," says Richards. This continuity of the idea to the finished, perfected work not only allowed the viewer to fully observe Bora's creative process but also gave the collection a feeling of intimacy. Interspersed throughout the grand paintings and intricate sculptures in Holden were notes written by Bora, some scribbled so hastily that they would only be legible to the writer. It was clear that his artistic inspiration struck often and urgently and that there were never lapses in his drive to create, recreate, and dissolve the barriers between himself and his artwork.

The exhibit is also a testament to the Asheville and Warren Wilson communities, toward which Richards is outspokenly grateful. Many of Bora's works needed to be matted and framed before they could be displayed, and other architectural renderings needed to be brought in for the sculptures that varied from small to colossal. It was a huge undertaking for any one person, so Richards solicited the help of art enthusiasts and friends.

"Blackbird Frame & Art...was very generous in their framing help" says Richards. "Colin Post of Painting Conservation helped to preserve the damaged pieces; photographers Steve Mann and Richard Brown helped document the works; Eric Baden [WWC staff member] and his wife Helen Robinson have been invaluable in their support and talents; the [Holden] gallery crew is fantastic to work with, as are the art faculty I have met. And I can't say enough about how Dusty with his gentle guidance really brought the show to culmination."

While the process of setting up the exhibit may have been a group effort, the work itself that was displayed is truly a glimpse into the creative pulse and artistic determination of two individuals: Bora and Richards. While Bora's art stands as the face and body of the exhibit, it is their mutual passion for the creative process that is the heart and Richards' resolve to make sure that Bora's work lives long after him that is the essence. As she says with obvious awe and respect toward the volume and quality of her late husband's work, "He was continuously developing, working, creating... This is a snapshot."