A fresh look at visual arts in Manitou Springs

By Rhonda Van Pelt

“Plein air” is a fancy way of saying that artists — predominantly painters — create their work outside. So don’t let that phrase keep you from strolling through the city, talking with and watching the artists participating in this year’s plein air celebration, the second edition of Manitou Paints!

Artist and gallery owner Tracy Miller organized the event this year and last year, and said she learned a lot from that inaugural foray. “The most overwhelming thing we learned from the first year was that the public was really engaged about it. They thought it was great,” Miller said.

Miller said participating artists enjoyed receiving positive feedback from art lovers. “The artists were all talking about how people made comments like, ‘This is just a really neat thing to see happening in downtown Manitou. We’re really enjoying watching the artists paint.’

This year, the completed paintings will be in a silent auction at the Manitou Art Center later that day. A one-hour gap between the brushes taking their final stroke and the auction will give artists time to prepare their paintings for display, not to mention time for visitors to stop by a local restaurant for lunch.

Part of the auction proceeds will be donated to the Manitou Springs Chamber of Commerce, an idea Miller got from a plein air event she participated in, held in Creede.

Many people who collect her work travel here from the north end to the south end of the Front Range, and they love to spend a day or an overnight in Manitou.

“What a great way to spend a fall day. The artists last year, it was really nice for them because it gave them a chance to engage with the public right on the street. They could visit, hand out their cards,” Miller said.

“It’s different from a studio tour; it’s different from walking into a gallery.”

Miller plans to set up her easel, canvas and supplies near the Manitou/Ruxton roundabout, so she can easily direct people to her Ruxton Avenue gallery or dash there for whatever she needs.

Each October, the Pikes Peak region celebrates Arts Month as a way to elevate the visibility and importance of arts and culture in our community. The official call to action during Arts Month is to “have at least one new cultural experience with family or friends during the month.” The first week focuses on visual arts, the second on theater and film, the third on poetry, prose and comedy, and the fourth on music and dance. Information: PeakRadar.com/ArtsMonth.

Mo Morrow works on a drawing during the 2017 Manitou Paints! Morrow will again represent Commonwheel Artists Co-op in this year’s event.

“In this year, I’m not running around like a crazy woman, so I’ll actually get out on the street and paint,” she said.

The artists will have two hours to work on their paintings, which can be intimidating for some people. But, as Miller points out, Creede’s plein air event gives artists only one hour.

“I can paint a painting, for sure, within that two hours. Will it always be the best thing I’ve ever done? Probably not, but I can do it. I’m very adept at doing it. It’s taken me 30 years to get good enough that I can do it in that timeframe.”

The Manitou Paints! participants can paint whatever subject they choose. Miller is known for depicting wildlife in bright, bold brushstrokes, but she said she might use photos she’s taken at Garden of the Gods as her source images.

She hopes to complete two paintings, starting with a small one that won’t take long. That will help her warm up for a larger painting, maybe 16 by 20 inches.

Miller, who paints in acrylics and usually works on a large table with a bucket of water nearby, will modify her set-up to make it more portable.

In late September, she took a watercolor workshop in Creede with acclaimed painter and teacher Stephen Quiller. She felt that time painting in a different media would help her prepare mentally for the plein air event.

“The only way you can learn and grow as an artist is to sometimes do things that you don’t feel comfortable doing,” Miller said.

She’ll have plenty of time to spread her artistic wings when she closes her gallery in late December after seven years in business.

Natalie Johnson, in her capacity as director of the Manitou Springs Creative District, said she hopes that Miller will continue organizing Manitou Paints! Miller does want to return as a painter for the third annual event.

Johnson, who missed last year’s iteration, will be in town this time and is looking forward to watching the artists at work.

“The natural beauty of Manitou Springs makes it a perfect fit for a plein air event. We live here because we are inspired by our surroundings, and artists are too,” she said.

NEED A LITTLE HELP GETTING THE WORD OUT?

Uncle Sam’s Pancake House

WEEKDAYS

Early Bird Special
6:30–8 a.m.
$6.50
Open: Mon-Sun 6 a.m.–2 p.m.
341 Manitou Avenue
685-9525

Advertise in the Pikes Peak Bulletin. Call 685-9690

IF YOU GO

Manitou Paints! will take place near galleries throughout Manitou Springs. 11 a.m.–1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 6, with the silent art auction 2–3 p.m. at the Manitou Art Center, 513 Manitou Ave. Information: 650-0827 or tracy@tracymillerfineart.com.

PARTICIPANTS

- Cherokee’s of Manitou: names not available
- Commonwheel Artists Co-op: Jean Cuchiaro and Mo Morrow
- Darpino Studio Gallery: names not available
- Fare Bella: names not available
- Green Horse Gallery: Ken and Tina Riesterer
- Manitou Art Center: names not available
- Mark Day Fine Art: names not available
- Tracy Miller Gallery: Coni Grant, Miller and Mary Welty