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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice job! Love the lede.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Making it real

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

At the Rock River Artists Open Studio Tour, you can meet
the artists where they work

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

OUT ON COUNTRY ROADS from South Newfane to
Brookline, artists and craftspeople work their hands to shape clay,
paint, wood, fabric, even tea bags into one-of-a-kinds.

It's what they do: Whatever the times, they keep creating,
exploring, finding place and peace on the canvas, the
workbench, the potter's wheel.

11 So it is with the 11-member Rock River Artists (RRA), as
12 the public can witness during the collective's 33rd annual Open
13 Studio Tour this Saturday and Sunday, July 18 and 19, from 11
14 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day.

15 For over three decades, the RRA tour has changed
16 characters and routes, contracted and expanded, and continually
17 grown a following among those who appreciate the human
18 process of making art and craft — from raku pottery to painting,
19 from thread-on-fabric images to upcycled, inlaid jewelry.

20 Following bright RRA signs, one can start in South
21 Newfane at the historic Schoolhouse to pick up a map and see a
22 sampling of each artist's work.

23 * * *

24 THERE, YOU'LL ALSO meet Brittany Bills-Coleman, a rising
25 artist who doesn't yet have a studio to tour; instead, she creates
26 steadily at an old oak table at home. Having shown mainly with
27 the RRA and at other area events, this is her second year with the
28 group.

29 Smitten with nature, landscapes, and the charm of
30 everyday things, Bills-Coleman uses a mix of materials from
31 pressed flowers to acrylics on tea bags and on handmade paper.

32 Some of her depictions are set within multi-portaled
33 frames, others in funky finds of various sizes.

34 Some in miniature frames were inspired by Brattleboro
35 Festival of Miniatures Co-founder Melany Kahn, for whose festival
36 centerpiece dollhouse Bills-Coleman donated a miniature last
37 December.

38 Bills-Coleman's attention to detail is precise and serves
39 her subjects and palette well in renderings of birds, flora,
40 mountains, and commonplace animals. Each has a homespun
41 feeling, an attractive innocence. She'll be at the Schoolhouse
42 each tour day to talk with visitors about her work.

43 * * *

44 FROM THE SCHOOLHOUSE heading west on Auger Hole
45 Road, you'll find seasoned and popular raku pottery artist,
46 Richard Foye, who's been with the RRA since its beginning.

47 Raku is a low-firing process which involves "removing
48 pottery from the kiln while at bright red heat and placing it into
49 containers with combustible materials," according to
50 thesprucecrafts.com.

51 In two rustic spaces spattered with ephemera, Foye
52 keeps at it — trying new shapes and sizes and even mugs with
53 handles. He likes to introduce a new glaze now and then. This
54 year's is lemony, bright, and comforting, especially with the
55 crackle of raku firing.

56 Having recently had a show at his alma mater, the
57 Putney School, Foye still shows at the League of NH Craftsmen's
58 Fair in Sunapee, New Hampshire.

59 Checking in with Foye at his studio, *The Commons*
60 learned more about his influencers, especially about British
61 studio potter and art educator Bernard Leach's bringing to the
62 West from Japan the art of raku.

63 And just down the road from Foye, find Chris Darrow at
64 Olallie Daylily Farms. Having lived in South Newfane for over 50
65 years, Darrow has spent most of his time there nurturing an
66 expansive display of many-colored lilies preparing each of
67 dozens of varieties for sale.

68 He denies he's an artist in that realm; he's merely a
69 facilitator, he says. Lately, inspired by the natural world, by
70 archaic and archeological art, and by his mother, the late Ellen
71 Darrow (Aho) a lifelong artist, Darrow has been exploring
72 expression in craft and experimenting with materials and
73 methods that call him.

74 "I find the patterns, shapes and natural rhythm of items
75 like shells, seed pods, flowers, [and] fossils particularly
76 compelling and inspiring. As for the archeological and archaic
77 aspect, I have always been struck by the child-like simplicity and
78 yet deeply artistic appearance of ancient art."

79 In his basement studio that doubles as Olallie’s office,
80 Darrow allows a spontaneous and unpredictable approach that
81 lately has included working with setting images on tiles — some
82 of them his mother’s drawing — and firing them in various ways
83 with a range of glazes.

84 He makes myriad coins, too, using different stamps on
85 clay which will be available on the tour. They appeal especially
86 to kids, he says, being handmade: As if on an “archaeological
87 dig” they yield a “connectedness to something that’s real and not
88 on a screen.”

89 * * *

90 HEADING EAST toward Williamsville on Dover Road, you
91 can turn on to Baker Brook to catch up with Deidre Scherer, who
92 has pioneered the figurative potential of both thread-on-layered-
93 fabric and woven paper constructions.

94 Seen recently in an episode of *Here We Are* [on](#)
95 [Brattleboro Community Television](#), Scherer is represented by
96 Mitchell-Giddings Gallery in Brattleboro. Her work has been
97 seen in museums, exhibitions, and galleries around the U.S., in
98 various books and magazines, and even on film.

99 Much of Scherer’s work reflects aging and end-of-life
100 moments and has been sought for inclusion in works on such
101 subjects. Another “exciting [development] was when a woman
102 out of Australia was giving a talk in Singapore on hospice” in
103 which she used several images of Scherer’s work to punctuate her
104 presentation.

105 Working in her attic studio on a disciplined schedule
106 amidst works in progress, fabric pieces taken from meticulously
107 arranged stacks, threads, and a trusty sewing machine, Scherer
108 depicts both still life and a range of figures — mainly elderly —
109 in exquisitely arranged selections of calicos and colors.

110 * * *

111 T. BREEZE VERDANT’S studio is full of micro drill presses,
112 large equipment, trays of works in progress, and an odd

113 assortment of materials, all used to create delicately inlaid
114 earrings and pendants.
115 “I continue to play with beer cans I find on the side of
116 the road,” he says, in his ongoing quest for new materials to
117 upcycle. “I post on Front Porch Forum, ‘I’m looking for copper
118 strand wire,’ and I find myself down at my friend Barry’s house,
119 where he loves to hold on to car parts. He’s got a whole bucket of
120 all these battery cables, these fine copper strands that look like
121 comet tailings.”

122 Verdant has “a lot of fun playing with these different
123 metals — fine strands of extension cords to heavier speaker
124 wires.”

125 “I’m chopping them up into little pieces and just gluing
126 them into holes to see how they come out,” he says. “It’s a pretty
127 beautiful medium — these brass, copper, nickel wires against the
128 black background of recycled ebony piano keys along with
129 abalone and mother of pearl. There’s just no end to what you can
130 do.”

131 About his designs, Verdant says, “people do like the
132 mountains, sky, water,” depicted in much of his work, but he’s
133 also inclined toward more abstraction.

134 “I just worship the beauty of the earth and sky —
135 anything that hints in that direction,” he says.

136 Just think, he adds, “of a magic moment when you were
137 standing there and a comet goes by. You weren’t expecting it, and
138 all of a sudden there’s this blazing flame in the sky.”

139 That “magic” is what Verdant aims to capture.

140 * * *

141 BEFORE YOU LEAVE this area, head up Sunset Lake Road to
142 North Pond Road, where you can catch potter Matthew Tell in a
143 well-organized and spacious studio with a wood kiln in its
144 designated building out back. Downstairs and up, the eye feasts
145 on a range of glazes, shapes, tried-and-true works, and newer
146 ventures.

147 Like Foye, Tell has scaled his travels back to just the
148 Sunapee fair, but his studio has still been buzzing with, among
149 other activities, a 10-person, two-day workshop in wood firing in
150 which five “what I’ll call kids from New York City” took part.

151 “They were just soaking it up and that was exciting,”
152 because, he says, with digital fabrication and the expense of
153 schooling, there are fewer and fewer young people plying crafts.

154 For example, he adds that “Sunapee used to just allow
155 people from New Hampshire and within 10 miles of the border
156 in, and now they accept guests” from even-farther reaches.

157 Tell plans more such workshops, which he posts online
158 — surprising himself, as he is one who once thought he’d never
159 be on a computer much.

160 * * *

161 TRAVEL TOWARD Newfane on Route 30 and turn on Bruce
162 Brook Road, where you’ll find Gayle Robertson’s studio — airy
163 and full of sunlight.

164 Over each of the last few winters, Robertson says, she
165 has chosen a subject, “and just worked with that all winter,”
166 using that practice as a way to explore color, value, form, shape.

167 She finds the challenge “a good practice for the winter,
168 although it does make me kind of crazy by the end.”

169 “It’s always interesting to look at several of one thing,
170 you know?” she says. “That’s what [Andy] Warhol was all about
171 in so many ways, and so many artists do that over and over again,
172 because we don’t see things the same from day to day. We’re
173 different people, we’re a little different after each painting, each
174 conversation.”

175 Such is seen in a recent exhibition at Brattleboro’s 118
176 Elliot, which she curated, and it was also in with works that treat
177 the same simple still life through different lenses, each in
178 engaging colors, each different from the last.

179 Robertson has also been exploring more large-scale
180 formats, meeting a challenge to make something with materials

181 she'd never used before. That has led to her displaying two-sided
182 pieces hung and anchored to the floor of her studio.

183 There, she works on both sides in a more sculptural
184 approach "building up color" and "creating forms, creating
185 space, and then there's light," which she uses to striking effect,
186 not surprisingly given her background in lighting design.

187 Robertson enjoys doing the open studios, especially
188 seeing an artist who is really at work.

189 "You walk into a space and see what their process is
190 like," she says. "That makes it real."

191 * * *

192 LEAVING Bruce Brook Road just a short distance up Route
193 30, you'll find new RRA member Ed Jekot at his Gallery 1330.
194 The director of marketing at Mary Meyer in Townshend, Jekot
195 came to Vermont after listening to a [podcast](#) featuring an old
196 friend and fellow Rhode Island School of Design alum, Adrianna
197 Alty, with historian and writer, Jill Lepore.

198 As noted on [rockriverartists.com](#), Jekot's paintings
199 "explore ideas of science, humor, space, and narrative, often
200 looking at the relationship between people, pattern, and
201 environment. Working across different materials and processes,
202 he investigates how space is experienced and understood. While
203 each series develops its own visual language, recurring formal
204 elements connect the work throughout his practice."

205 Of late, Jekot says he's done "a lot of sculpture and
206 exploring more encaustic with wax, playing with that — with
207 gray-and-white underpaint and then the oil paint on top," all
208 particularly effective in his depictions of animals that blend
209 whimsical and ethereal.

210 * * *

211 GIANNA ROBINSON is up Route 30 a few miles past
212 Newfane Village in a charming free-standing studio in which the
213 painter's work is seen in its several stages — works in acrylics,
214 alcohol ink, water color, even oil.

215 What draws her to paint, she notes on
216 rockriverartists.com, “is the same feeling I get walking in the
217 woods, kayaking on an open pond, or snowshoeing up a hill. It is
218 calming, meditative and embracing.”

219 Painting, she writes, “keeps me connected to myself and
220 to the grounding that nature gifts me. It helps me feel truly
221 grateful for my senses and emotions, in addition to helping boost
222 my mental and physical health.”

223 Robinson has been keeping journals, several sketchbooks
224 filled with drawings, paintings, experiments, and whimsies.
225 Flipping through them, one gets a good sense of how her art
226 evolves as a reflection of her passages in life and nature.

227 “I revel in how art embodying the natural world can
228 bring transcendent memories indoors,” her artist’s statement
229 explains.

230 After she hung her work at Brattleboro’s Mocha Joe’s
231 recently, “I had a lot of great feedback,” Robinson recalls.

232 In addition to preparing for the RRA tour she’s soon to be
233 focused on a September show at Newfane’s Crowell Gallery with
234 her mother, Deidre Scherer, and her sister, artist Corina Willette, a
235 member of the art faculty of SUNY New Paltz.

236 The show will also feature works by Robinson’s
237 grandfather, Fred F. Scherer, who painted dioramas at the
238 American Museum of Natural History in New York City, and her
239 step-grandmother, Cicely Aikman, a painter of renown.

240 * * *

241 TRAVEL BACK DOWN Route 30 and turn left toward
242 Brookline, and soon after the green iron bridge, you’ll find Noelle
243 VanHendrick and Eric Hendrick’s studio, ZPOTS, new to the RRA
244 tour.

245 According to a recent RRA press release, “in a busy,
246 multi-annexed, yet moderately-sized studio, the couple and a few
247 others produce work to be marketed as the 25-year-old ZPOTS
248 through 100 galleries across 50 states and abroad. They’re

249 regulars, too, at both trade and retail shows up and down the East
250 Coast.”

251 Looking at shelf upon shelf of inscribed pieces, one finds
252 pithy sentiments and inspiration, all of VanHendrick’s making,
253 from simply “joy,” “hope,” and “abundance” to “bee the change.”

254 “A lot of folks don’t recognize or realize that it’s all hand
255 inscribed,” says VanHendrick. “They think it’s like a decal, but
256 everything is hand done” — all the stars and hearts and words
257 and expressions of inspiration.

258 As noted on rockriverartists.com, “Noelle VanHendrick’s
259 artistic vision is intuitive, atmospheric, and deeply expressive.
260 Her work is guided by a love of beauty, storytelling, and
261 emotional resonance, often exploring the intersection of art,
262 music, intimacy, and everyday ritual. She brings a raw, soulful
263 sensibility to the studio’s creative direction, shaping collections
264 that feel both timeless and alive.”

265 Being part of the RRA community, she says, helps fulfill
266 ZPOTS mission: “We’re happy — and really excited — to be a
267 part of this community of artists.”

268 * * *

269 JUST A JOG FARTHER on Grassy Brook Road, take a left on
270 Hill Road and up there find Nancy Libby’s studio overlooking a
271 spacious pasture with hills beyond.

272 In the RRA press release, Libby, new to the collective,
273 says she’s been painting since high school.

274 “Basically, art, English, and sports were my three things. I
275 didn’t do well in math,” she says — and, ironically, she worked in
276 software development for 30 years.

277 “I’ve always had a little studio, a place to do art,” Libby
278 says. “I knew when I retired, it was going to be my full-time gig.”
279 And so it is. She’s had recent shows in Dover and in Newfane
280 and is happy to be gearing up for the RRA tour.

281 Working in acrylics with some mixed media she’s moved
282 and inspired “by what’s around me,” she says, pointing out the
283 picture window from within her studio’s bright white walls.

284 "I spend a lot of time in the woods with my dog walking
285 and hiking," Libby says. "So really just clearing my mind and
286 letting go when I'm in this space. I'm always working on more
287 than one thing at a time."

288 That way, she explains, "I can get my color palette right. I
289 go through these phases where I do more mellow colors, but
290 right now I'm working bright."

291 Of the RRA, she adds, "it's inspiring to hang out with
292 them. I mean, just to talk about life — it doesn't even have to be
293 about art, right? But just creative minds together."

294 * * *

295 *Visitors are encouraged to pick up a map and start their*
296 *Rock River Artists tour at the historic South Newfane*
297 *Schoolhouse, 390 Dover Rd. For more information on this free*
298 *event and for photos of artists' work, visit rockriverartists.com.*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

299 **ANNIE LANDENBERGER** is an arts writer and columnist
300 for *The Commons*. Her partner is T. Breeze Verdant, one of the
301 artists interviewed in this column.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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