



Immersive art, new artists at Concept's 'Full Circle' exhibition



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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JUL 8, 2021

7:42 AM

With the pandemic subsiding, people recognized things were slowly opening up and returning to normal.

Alison Oehler, owner of Concept Art Gallery in Regent Square, recognized it, too. The gallery will host “[Full Circle](#),” a new exhibition inspired by the pandemic that explores the circle as shape and metaphor. The free show opens at 10 a.m. Saturday and continues through Aug. 28. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday.

After putting out a call to local artists, Oehler and co-owner Sam Berkovitz juried the submissions from over 95 artists, many of whom were new to Concept. Ultimately, 34 artists were chosen for the exhibition, which features paintings, fabric art, abstract works and an immersive installation.

“It’s rare for us to do huge, multi-artist shows,” Oehler said. “We frequently show single artists or a pair of artists at a time.... It’s an organizational

challenge to rally all 34 artists into the space and get their work here. It's fun because you get exposed to things that are new to you."

"Full Circle" takes advantage of the gallery's annex space, the Regent Square movie theater acquired earlier this year. Millvale-based artist Owen Lowrey's installation requires visitors to take an active role in a dark room, lit with strings of purple light and a game projected on a blank wall.

A motion sensor in the middle of the room tracks players' hands, and the game invites them to become a void, a black hole, trying to catch a ball of light. When players miss their attempts to catch the orb, circles appear on screen, creating abstract art. A bass sound hums through the space and progressively harder levels are added.

The goal of the piece, Lowrey explained, is to simulate the cyclical often difficult nature of collaboration and the choice of participants to see a project (or a game) through even though it may be challenging. The harder one works to nab the orb floating onscreen, the more complex and colorful the circles in the background become.

The work, titled "Restoring the Void," was inspired by Lowrey's graduate work at Ohio University, where he found the competitive atmosphere "most combative" and projects without full ownership would "vanish" much like the abstract works on screen. Prints of the finished product, made more vibrant by the player's struggle, will be available for purchase.

"I want to create a situation that rewards somebody being curious," the artist said. "If somebody explores it a little bit, they feel happy about it. But if they go deeper, there's more and change and for their decisions they make, they're rewarded."

Lowrey admitted some nerves about being the first immersive installation at Concept Art Gallery.

"It's not just for me," he said. "Being the first time somebody tries something, you're kind of an ambassador to everyone. You're the first impression. You want to give as good of an experience as possible if you're willing to take that chance."

Artist Emily Escalante of the North Side is exhibiting her work at Concept for the first time. She submitted her painting, "Soft Power," which features swirls of white and yellow-orange and reds on a canvas wrapped in denim. She refers to her work as "energetic abstracts."

She said the quarantine allowed her to bring art to the forefront after nearly a decade as a massage therapist and prior to that, a graphic designer.

“‘Full Circle’ is the perfect metaphor for this time,” Escalante said. “I just started painting in my garage, and I can’t stop.”

The artist was inspired by a conversation about how women navigate a patriarchal society, frequently forced to apply soft power to achieve their goals.

“It ends up being this massive, invisible energy that gets spent just to move forward,” Escalante said. “In my mind, it looked like a giant storm system. That’s what it ended up looking like.”

The painting took a week to create, and the denim came from her cousin’s Morningside shop, Firecracker Fabrics. Escalante said her point of view stems from her life, her experiences as a woman and mother and “being a creative person figuring out how to be a creative person.”

Being chosen for “Full Circle” encouraged her to continue painting, she said.

“It’s a huge honor for me. I’m relatively new to painting — not necessarily art making — but publicly putting my art out there is new for me.”

Also new for Concept, poet Ed Steck will display one of his poems on the former movie theater marquee. Oehler said the poetry display will be the first of many creative uses for the marquee.

“We’ve been using it to announce the shows, and it’s been really successful,” Oehler said. “A lot of people see it driving up Braddock Avenue. It’s a high-traffic area. We’re excited to keep it. It’s historic architecture in Regent Square.”

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First Published July 8, 2021, 6:00am

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