Art Mirrors Our Environment

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Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the annual Art Fair in Stockholm Wisconsin, reflecting on how the art mirrors the natural environment as well as the political environment in our state.

STOCKHOLM, WI - “If you came to Stockholm today, you came up or over a river,” musician Julie Patchouli told the folks gathered at the 42nd Annual Art Fair. The musical group, known by Julie’s last name, began a rousing river song as part of the celebration of art in the village of Stockholm, Wisconsin.

Stockholm is a picturesque Mississippi River town of 66 individuals (not counting the dogs and cats) that swells by many hundreds on art fair day. Most of the art fair is in the scenic village park on the riverbank of Lake Pepin – the widest spot in the Mississippi.

Over 100-juried Midwest artists brought their pottery, paintings, photography, jewelry, glass, leather, metal, wood, and hand painted silk clothing.

Mary Peterson of rural Stockholm brought her hand-woven alpaca ornaments and wearables. She also brought one of her partners in this artistic venture – the alpaca “Mabel”.

I was struck by how much the art fair – the art, artists, and attendees, mirrored the environment. For example, the hues, tints, shades, and tones of nature were reflected in the art.

I saw the greens and greys of a misty August morning in pottery, the vivid pinks and lavender blue of the tall, blooming Delphinium's stalks in photography, the rich gold and red of autumn leaves in acrylic paints.

Artists' renditions of Wisconsin's natural beauty leapt to life: the rushing streams along deep green woods, the crashing waves of Lake Superior, the huge, fluffy cumulus clouds over a rolling landscape, and the multi-colored rocks washed over by a stream.

Much of the art that reflected our environment was three-dimensional: glistening water droplets in earrings, the graceful swirls of wood grains accentuated by the carvers' hand in wooden bowls, and all sorts of clay lumps turned to art suited for daily activities of eating and entertaining.

Around every corner I found a new interpretation of the essence of our great state.

What is more Wisconsin than cows and fishing? I found artistic versions of cows in paintings, pottery, and even leather. But nothing matched the popularity of fish! I found fish everywhere: in photography, paintings, woodcarvings, jewelry, metal sculpture, and even T-shirts.

Renditions of Wisconsin's beauty were not limited to objects of art. The group Patchouli entertained the art fair goers with "Folk Meets Flamenco" music including the song "Amarantha" (named after the grain, I suppose) from their CD "Dragonfly". The music made me feel like dragonflies were darting around me.

This also might have been because art fair-goers were decorated with millions of mayflies. These rather large, harmless insects looked like Mother Nature's works of art. In its flying form, the insect has two sets of delicate lacewings tinted grey, olive, or blue, large eyes, short, bristle-like antennas, and two or three long sweeping tails.

Once mayflies enter their winged state, they cannot feed. Sometimes their existence in winged form lasts only a few hours; which means the mass emergence of the mayflies – which nature timed perfectly to coincide with the art fair – reminded us of how our time on this planet is

short-lived.

People came with family and friends to enjoy the festivities. Throughout the day, people I met shared ideas and concerns. Topics ranged from local affairs – especially sand mines and railroads – to state and national politics. I heard concern about cuts to the UW and spending on the Bucks Arena. Folks worried about the meager $1,400 per student the Pepin School District will receive in state aid. Pepin is among the 55% of public schools that will receive less state aid under the new state budget. Citizens raised concerns about privatization of health programs like FamilyCare and IRIS.

One woman, Marge Lorayne of rural Maiden Rock, told me of her fight with the telephone company to keep her home phone. “I have to go up to the top of the bluff to get cell coverage,” she told me. I spoke with her about policy in the budget related to landlines and my new bill to protect rural residents.

I found art also reflected our environment of frustration with recent governmental action. Perhaps none better than Paul Meddaugh’s comic photography of Wisconsin’s Capitol encircled by an enormous, puffy, white ghost. The photo’s title: “Who you gonna call?”

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