

# Juror's Statement

This is my 3<sup>rd</sup> time in the last 25 years to be invited as the juror for this perennially excellent art exhibition and I can honestly say that this year's entries were the most consistently excellent ever. Of 276 artworks, I chose 57 for inclusion. Of those pieces exhibited, I chose 13 to receive cash awards.

The consistency of quality is why I chose to recognize almost a fourth of them with a prize, rather than select a best of show with many runners-up. In fact, I'd say that just getting into the exhibit is a statement of excellence.

My main criterion was composition, which is also usually the first creative decision that an artist makes. My first four choices, "The Crystal Shoes" by Ye Wang, "The Wild, The Free" by Bob Neace, "W for the Win" by Matthew Lord, and "The Abyss" by Diana Unrein are all asymmetrical layouts that are nonetheless balanced compositions.

My second criterion was the artist's skill at manipulating their chosen medium. For instance, Ye Wang's oil painting has a subdued palette that is beautifully blended transitions, whereas Bob Neace's painting of a mare and foal is constructed from vigorous and distinctive brush marks.

These two criteria have to do with both skill and judgement, but subject matter is not part of my decision-making process except as regards the appropriateness of the media and method.

All art judging is, of course, a subjective process, even when one is not using the subject matter as a criterion. I believe that the power, value, and attraction of art is its ability to stimulate an emotional response. Isn't that, after all, why we love and collect art objects?

My favorite painting in our personal art collection is a large abstract expressionist painting that I've lived with and looked at daily for over 20 years. This means that there is in it no image depicted in it at all and yet I experience an emotion through it. However, I was introduced to the art world through my own experiences as figurative painter, and I would assert that the strongest emotional components of this year's "Smoky" are the figurative paintings, meaning those with people in them.

All of the self-portraits in the exhibit are remarkable examples of this genre, but I'd like to also note Michaela Vaili Groeblacher's "Stone and Bone" sculpture and particularly the central bust of a woman in that installation, who, but for the color of the ceramic medium, could be alive and looking in your eyes. Also remarkable is C.T. Hsia's "Passing Scottish Girl," a watercolor that feels as if it could be an image called from one's personal memory. And, finally, there is Deborah-Hane's watercolor painting of Santa, titled "My Joy Is Yours," that makes of this mythical figure a real human being.

***Jay Nelson, Smoky Hill juror, April 2025***