



30 MILES SOUTH
Art from the Stillmoreroots Group

Conspirators in a rural revolution

• Stillmoreroots Group holds last gallery show of the year in Louisville



By Parish Howard

Editor

They have hung their paintings and photography on farms and in backyards, shown their sculptures and installations in town centers, churches and among pinetrees in rural Georgia's backwoods.

"When we first got together, we talked about showing in places where people don't normally think of showing art," Anthony Faris said Friday of his group of friends, partners conspiring in a revolution of cultural exposure in the rural south.

The Stillmoreroots Group, seven professional artists bound by their dedication to the rural south and based in Swainsboro, will be presenting its last traditional gallery show of the year, *Thirty Miles South*, at Louisville's Firehouse Gallery through June 26.

The opening reception will be Friday, June 16, from 7-9 p.m. with an artist talk Saturday, June 17, at 2 p.m.

"We'll still be showing in galleries as individuals, but we've decided to show as a group in only alternative venues for the rest of the year," Faris said.

Faris says the artists, ranging from 25 to 31, consider themselves more of an art advocacy group interested in bringing exhibitions and programs to areas that customarily are underserved or overlooked by more traditional artists.

"When we heard that the Louisville gallery is interested in the southern rural aesthetic and in programming for the community, it sounded right up our alley," Faris said.

Thirty Miles South, the show currently open at the Firehouse Gallery came about when the

group recognized that the neighboring county's gallery shared its goals and interests.

"Sure, Thirty Miles South refers to the distance between the two cities," Faris said, "but it also implies certain connections. Neighboring communities are connected historically and through the old train routes. We think it's important to explore and strengthen those connections."

Gallery co-organizer Helen Aikman says she considers the group one of The Firehouse Gallery's and Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville's most promising partnering opportunities.

"We hear much concern being expressed about talented young people leaving their rural communities behind," she said. "The Roots are an important example of exactly the opposite. They are exceptionally bright and motivated young professionals who have gone out to explore other regions and cities, and who have come here to work, not in spite of the fact that it is deeply rural, but expressly because it is."

The Louisville Show

According to Faris, the show's themes touch on history, family and landscape and has been inspired by

both Louisville and Swainsboro, as well as other parts of the rural south.

"Desmal created these really beautiful boxes from pieces of his grandfather's barn," Faris said. "He's kind of mysterious and likes for you to interact with his pieces."

The series of five boxes are each locked with the key waxed to the front.

Purcell says the boxes, as artwork, exist on a lot of levels.

"My grandfather is going through alzheimers," he said. "I grew up with his stories and he is a large part of who I am. As his disease progresses a lot of his stories are being locked away, so on one level, these boxes are very personal."

On another level, the boxes connect with each viewer's imagination and the stories of their own lives.

"Hopefully everyone who looks at these boxes will connect with them in their own way," Purcell said. "They'll have their own ideas about what's inside."

Each box contains a story, a relic or artifact, but Purcell says he wonders if those who purchase the pieces will ever open them.

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Roots Group shows in Louisville

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"To scrape the key off and open the box, in a way, is to destroy the piece," he said. "Which is okay. But as long as the box is locked, the owner can project his own stories and ideas into it...I'd love to talk to some people at the opening and let them tell me what's in the boxes for them."

Jean Gray Drake's series of mixed media pieces line a wall of the gallery. Faris says they depict images from her family history and by viewing each one in sequence one can trace her family from grandmother, mother and herself through the images.

Bridget Conn's pieces incorporate organic components such as egg shells, dirt, bones, cinnamon, teabags and bees, blending her interests in science and folklore.

"She's very into concepts of femininity and ideas of women's work," Faris said.

In addition to Faris, Purcell, Drake and Conn, group members Bryan Ghiloni, Nick Nelson and Brandon Tatom also have pieces in the exhibit.

"They think and write and create art about the essential values of rural life," Aikman said. "Their vision is hopeful, unsentimental and clear. They see that art is critical to the survival of rural values."

More on The Group

The group was formed when all of its members lived and attended colleges within about 45 minutes of each other.

Members have lived all over the United States, from New York to Oregon, and have chosen rural Georgia over the metropolitan art centers as a place to focus, develop and promote their work.

Purcell's family has deep roots in Stillmore, a small town of about 300 southeast of Swainsboro.

"None of us really had any roots anywhere," Faris said. "We were so impressed with the place, with his family's connections to the land. We adopted his history and roots and made Swainsboro our headquarters, our home."

They have been exhibiting there, in the small town of Stillmore, for four years.

"When we do a show there, the population doubles," Faris said. "Now that's an impact on a community."

The vision and goals of their group involve providing the traditionally underserved art communities of the rural south through theory-based education, hands-on workshops and locally involved exhibitions.

"As an art advocacy group we hope to demonstrate that art events and exhibitions have the power to create, build and enhance communities," the group writes in its artists' statement on The Firehouse Gallery's website, www.galleryafire.com.

"We hope to build relationships with our community through artist lectures, studio visits, art festivals and exhibitions, field trips and workshops. We believe that by reuniting as a group and giving direct attention to these communities through the before mentioned programs, we can unite the diverse peoples of the rural south whose rich culture and history tells one of the most elaborate and eternal stories common throughout time about human life and struggle: the struggle to protect family, live harmoniously with one's neighbor, learn and grow by self-exploration, and build and sustain a community whose goal is to remember the past, celebrate the present, and look forward to a future full of dreams, promise, and this land's prosperous potential."