

Age has no boundaries for artist's striking work

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Meeting Claremont artist Helen Rae is a treat, but make no mistake, she is in the creation business to create, not to meet reporters. After a quick but cordial greeting this past week, the 76-year-old artist was back at it, chipping away at another strikingly vivid work in colored pencil and graphite.



That kind of work ethic has served Ms. Rae well. She has been developing her craft every weekday at Claremont's First Street Gallery Art Center of the Tierra del Sol —producing one to two pieces per week — for the past 26 years. Over that time she has evolved to the point where her work has been a runaway sellout success at two recent Los Angeles solo shows and a prestigious art fair in New York City.

Ms. Rae is developmentally disabled and deaf. She communicates through notes and sign language. To see her talents recognized outside the walls of the Claremont progressive art center has been particularly moving for Rebecca Hamm, First Street Gallery's Director of Arts and Enterprise. "I don't think I have words to tell you how deep it goes," she said. "I get emotional when I even think about it because, like I said, after 26 years of knowing someone and knowing how fabulous she is. This is where all the chills come out because for the world to acknowledge and see that there are no limitations for creativity is just wonderful."

When Ms. Rae first came to First Street Gallery she had been working with her hands, doing needlepoint and other modest creative projects, but had not yet explored formal visual art. "She started out with very

great interest in anything she did, but she hadn't really worked with art materials before," said Ms. Hamm, who was her teacher at that time. Ms. Rae worked very quickly at first, seemingly eager to finish. Ms. Hamm worked with the budding artist to find a way to reach her, slowly getting her to slow down a bit and expand on her impulses.

Ms. Rae began drawing from nature and by recreating old masters' works. Over time a style emerged. "It's always been quirky stuff," Ms. Hamm explained. "Sometimes it's edgy. I just feel like she loves every line, every area of color and every surface she treats. She just loves it. She's just powerful." Ms. Rae has been developing her current re-interpretive style for several years.

After decades spent learning alongside Ms. Hamm and the many other talented teachers and mentors at First Street Gallery, Ms. Rae's work began to receive outside notice. After several group shows, at the Claremont Colleges and at First Street Gallery events, her first solo show was mounted in May 2015 at Los Angeles' Good Luck Gallery. The show sold out on opening night.

In January of this year Good Luck Gallery curator and owner Paige Wery (who is now representing Ms. Rae) took the artist's work to the Outsider Art Fair in New York City, where every piece sold out again. In New York Ms. Rae was "discovered" by a host of major New York collectors, art directors and curators. "We were getting minute-by-minute reports" of major collectors buying up pieces, and of art critics and patrons posting her work on Instagram, Ms. Hamm recalled.

Disparate Minds wrote about the impact of Ms. Rae's work at the New York show.

"The fair's most generous moment was The Good Luck Gallery's installation of stunning Helen Rae drawings—surfaces saturated with vigorous mark-making culminate in robust, stylized worlds rendered in graphite and colored pencil. Strong graphic or patterned passages have an inexplicable sense of depth and form, which transition into fields scattered with spare details, achieving an almost photographic quality."

Ms. Rae's second solo show opened last weekend, again at the Good Luck Gallery, and again, another sellout. Her next show is set for the fall in Paris, at the next Outsider Art Fair. Ms. Hamm is hopeful the artist will be able to make the trip to France.

"Helen's career is just unbelievable," Ms. Hamm said. "It's very exciting to see the response she has had. How fabulous that we get to be around this. To see that happening and know that there's no one that deserves it more is just so amazing."

Ms. Rae's show at the Good Luck Gallery runs through July 2. The gallery is located at 945 Chung King Rd., Los Angeles 90012 and is open Wednesday through Sunday from noon to 6 p.m., and by appointment. More information is available at thegoodluckgallery.com.

The First Street Gallery Art Center of the Tierra del Sol Foundation is located at 250 W. First St., Suite 120, Claremont. More information is available at tierradelsol.org/programs/1st-street-gallery-art-center.

—Mick Rhodes