UC SANTA BARBARA

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Air of Whimsy

Oscar Wilde described art as the most intense mode of individualism the world has known. Pablo Picasso found that the “purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls.” Tributes vary, but the pervasive message is that art is essential for our emotional well-being.

With this in mind, a zesty treat is on tap with “Puccinality: the Handmade Life of Fran and Keith Puccinelli,” a new exhibit that runs from Feb. 1 to March 4 at UC Santa Barbara’s College of Creative Studies Art Gallery. A reception will be held from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 4, at CCS. The exhibit and reception are open to the public.

The show is a rich ensemble of the couple’s art, including Keith’s drawings and sculptures, Fran’s textiles and many objects of curiosity from their folk art collection. Among the featured items are “Flashlights” and “Flaming Toaster,” two of Keith’s playful papier-mache pieces; and “Dot Rug,” Fran’s colorful creation of wool, monk’s cloth and cotton. The exhibition was organized by Dane Goodman, director of the Atkinson Gallery at Santa Barbara City College; independent curator/writer Meg Linton; and CCS Art Gallery Director Dan Connally.

A whimsical perspective is the backbone for “Puccinality” (poo-chin-ality), a lighthearted term for describing the Puccinellis’ style of a freewheeling yet tasteful stew of modern art with a blend of contemporary flavor and a dash of folk influence. It’s also meant to reflect their passion for the handmade. The exhibit also will feature a somewhat homey vibe with a couch and dining table — borrowed from the Puccinellis’ home — serving as part of the staging.

“The title, ‘Puccinality,’ is meant to describe Fran and Keith’s reflective ideas about art, design, humor, pathos, love and life, and the fact that for them those things are all bound together,” said Connally, adding that the Puccinellis have been a creative, dynamic and generous force in the artistic and business community in Santa Barbara, Carpinteria and Ventura.

“I’m excited to show with Fran for the first time,” Keith said, speaking of his late wife, who died in December. “Should have done this years ago. She was always my supporter, never feeling she was an artist in her own right. Or maybe she considered herself a non-exhibiting artist. Because everything she touched turned to beauty, albeit often a quirky, often humorous beauty.”

He noted that Fran collected and displayed pieces that most other people would pass over, including tiles, textiles and more. “She was the undesignated artist in the family,” he said. “I am thankful to have and exhibit her handiwork — everything touched by her hand. And I like showing my work with hers because it represents our eclectic approach to life, creativity and self-expression.”

Many may know Keith through his wife, Frances Garvin Puccinelli, who was a trailblazing entrepreneur who owned four businesses on Linden Avenue in Carpinteria, including the Frances Puccinelli Gallery. She was among the first in the region to show North and Latin American folk art. Keith also ran the award-winning Puccinelli Design firm. Some of his logos can still be seen at Enterprise Fish Co. in Santa Barbara and Hospice of Santa Barbara.

As an artist, Keith has had solo exhibitions throughout Southern California, including the Atkinson Gallery, the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum (now the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara) and the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

Connally said Keith is “a master deprecator as well as decorator,” who is quick to joke that his surname, Puccinelli, is a form of the Italian word for clown. That tag, he added, is a statement of fact and attitude for Keith, “a manifesto (to use another Italian word) of living and working.”

Goodman, a fellow artist and longtime friend of Keith, said the show he helped put together is “pretty exciting.” Asked what he thinks people will get out of it, he said: “I hope that they they’ll come away with a certain amount of joy. It will bring smiles to their faces.”

Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. To arrange a weekend or after-hours viewing, call Connally at 805-893-2364.

About UC Santa Barbara

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