



Jason Wu, 'Commute,' 2015, watercolor on illustration board. Judges' Recognition in Watercolor and Drawing.

Student Artists Matter

NUMU's countywide high school art show helps young people experience a taste of the real art world.

By Jessica Lyons Hardcastle

In her artist statement, Harriet Cassell describes her art, a porcelain spaceman rowing a bronze boat, thus: "He asked NASA for a ship. In retrospect, he should have specified 'spaceship.' Either way, he'll get to where he wants to go. It's all about the journey after all."

The mixed media piece is titled "In Orbit." It won Best in Show last year at the New Museum Los Gatos' annual Santa Clara Countywide High School Art Exhibition. At the time, Cassell was a Lynbrook High School senior. She used her prize money, \$5,000, toward tuition at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Cassell's theme—the journey—also applies to NUMU's exhibit, now in

its fifth year. It's open to any high school student in Santa Clara County. Many students spend the first half of the school year working on their art before the submission process begins in December.

In addition to a digital image of their piece, students are required to submit an artist statement to the museum. This year, NUMU hosted a student lab to help the high school students learn how to write their artist statements and frame their work, among other things.

From the hundreds of submissions received, a jury of professional artists and educators selects the pieces that NUMU will show during the exhibit, which runs for about a month. And

on April 21, at the opening reception that typically sees upwards of 500 attendees, NUMU will give a total of \$10,000 in scholarships and awards to the winning submissions—money that will help the students pursue visual arts in college and as a profession.

After the NUMU exhibit closes in May, the pieces are put on display at the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Young Artists Showcase.

"The NUMU exhibit is very unique in the process," says Esther Tokihiro, Santa Clara County Office of Education's visual and performing arts coordinator. "They ask students to think about what they are submitting—they're not just mailing something in. It is very thoughtful."



Jessica Yang, 'You Are What You Tweet,' 2015, watercolor. 1st Place in Watercolor and Drawing.

It asks students to communicate the symbolism, the expression of their piece as if they were a professional wanting to exhibit at a gallery. It is an invaluable experience.”

This is the second year the exhibition has used “Social Matters” as a theme. It was also the original 2012 theme, followed by “Art + Tech + Culture” (2013), “Response: Art is a Conversation” (2014) and “Bridges” (2015). But certain subjects tend to carry over year after year, says NUMU’s executive director Lisa Coscino.

“A lot of the students’ work, no matter what the theme, ends up being about the same stuff: identity, issues surrounding bullying and how we treat each other as human beings,

what the future holds, how students are dealing with pressure put on them by family and peer groups,” Coscino says.

She says the show—and the process—benefits students, as well as the museum and the larger community. In addition to awarding arts scholarships and providing a great college admissions tool, submitting their art to a museum helps students develop skills they will need to pursue a career in the arts. Additionally, a countywide competition gives kids another opportunity for self-expression and growth.

“We are narrowing the opportunities for all types of kids to be successful when we promote so much STEM [science, technology, engineering and



Matthew Greene, 'By Death,' 2015, digital illustration. 1st Place in Painting.



Steven McDonald, 'The Long March,' 2015, mixed media collage. 1st Place in Mixed Media.

LG Culture

math] over STEAM [science, technology, engineering, arts and math,]” she says. “It’s much harder to excel in your high school career as a visual artist, and competition is healthy. It’s about building character. If you don’t compete in sports or compete academically, how do you learn to be a good winner or good loser?”

Coscino points to Cassell as an example. She says she met the student artist and her teacher at the opening of the exhibit where Cassell’s winning piece was displayed. “This is such a professional work of art,” she says. “Harriet’s joy at creating this piece was so apparent, and you could see that so much of her great confidence in being able to create this artwork comes from her teacher.”

Next year, NUMU wants to expand the educational component, perhaps hosting three or four workshops to help students prepare their work before the submission deadline.

“We want this high school exhibit to be a beacon, a template for other museums that want to reach out to their community in this way,” Coscino says.

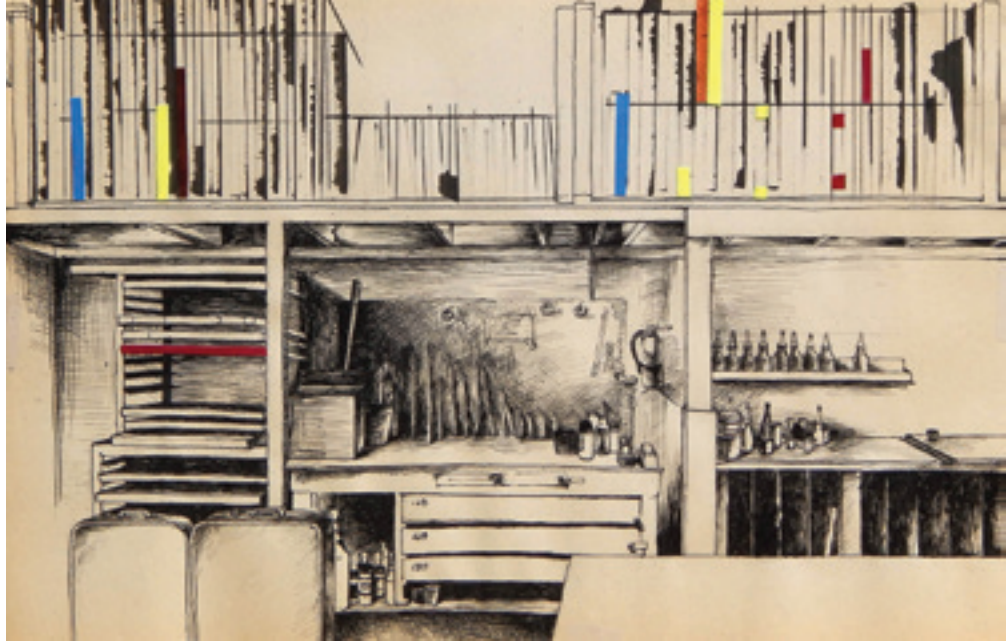
Mind Expansion

In the program’s first year, it received 254 entries from 24 schools. This year, it received 845 entries.

Mary Ellen Kaschub, who leads the high school exhibit committee, has been a part of the program since its inception. Kaschub is a retired corporate communications worker for the pharmaceutical industry and a former high school teacher. She’s also



Harriet Cassell, ‘In Orbit,’ 2015, bronze and porcelain..



Han Ding, ‘Creativity is Born Here,’ 2014, ink on old newsprint and cardboard pieces.

a member of the Los Gatos/Saratoga Camera Club.

The committee, a dedicated group of volunteers, meets weekly to make the exhibition happen. They develop the themes, secure sponsors and reach out to teachers. This year they also focused on attracting more students from East Santa Clara County, who have typically been underrepresented in the show.

“Art is extremely important, but it doesn’t always get the right emphasis,” Kaschub says. “We wanted to give the opportunity to celebrate student art and encourage them to go on. Every year it’s a snapshot, no matter what our theme is. It shows where these kids are mentally. What are they dealing with? It’s always fascinating to see their concerns. The art really accesses that part of the teenager. They are able to express what they are thinking, and that is the richest part.”

She remembers the 2013 Best in Show winner Danielle Chan, from Fremont High School, who created a clay Chinese take-out food container surrounded by clay fortune cookies wrapped in “fortunes”—coffee-stained paper with typed quotes about technology.

“My artistic interpretation of technology contrasts the simplicity of the past with the complexity of the present,” Chan wrote about her piece, “and reveals the underlying impact of our history that is sustained over time. It

demonstrates the fragility of life and the repercussions of a single moment in time caused by technology.”

Kaschub says Chan’s family worked in high tech; she and her family had always considered her art a hobby, not to be taken seriously. “But she won the \$5,000 scholarship, and it changed her thinking about it,” Kaschub says. “She ended up changing her major at Cal Berkeley to environmental design, incorporating the art and the tech.”

Margo Wixsom is an art teacher at Palo Alto High School whose students have participated in the contest since 2012. She says as soon as she heard about it, she changed her curriculum. Now all of her students are required to submit a piece of art they’ve been working on in class.

“I usually start out by saying, ‘How many of you would like \$500?’” Wixsom says. “NUMU is preparing this professional paradigm right here, right now. What this has given me, as a high school teacher, is the opportunity to step it way up. This is a real professional opportunity for students: a gallery saying we want students’ work. NUMU has created a model for us to use so that kids can have a very real professional experience.”

The High School Art Exhibition opens on April 21 with a reception and awards presentation. NUMU also hosts its Spring Exhibits Celebration on Saturday, March 12, 12–4pm. New Museum Los Gatos, 106 E Main St.