

Ominous scenes of subtle beauty



Stow resident Judith Jaffee composes paintings from her studio at ArtSpace-Maynard.

PHOTO BY BOB JOHNSON

Artist fuses light, darkness

BY BOB JOHNSON
CORRESPONDENT

For whatever reason — she simply doesn't say — Judith Jaffee's artwork is mostly about the dark side.

Ominous, featureless creatures, creatures with human yet strangely non-human form, roam aimlessly or sit with what appears to be, at best, indifference. Large, obese, distasteful looking humanoids with blank uncaring expressions manufacture very small defenseless and helpless things that look like little people. Two clearly human adults, male and female, hold a clearly human baby, but all three are underwater; all three have unforgettable expressions of fear and pain. All three have a way of twisting the gut.

"In life, there is wondrous and overpowering beauty," says Jaffee. "But there is also cruelty and terror. Together they create a mysterious and remarkable world. It's this dualism that's behind my work."

The cruelty and terror in her work is clear. The "beauty" she talks of, however, is more subtle. It's under the surface, not so much understood as felt. But it sure is there. It's there in the creation of the work itself, in the awesome skill and technique needed to transfer such multi-dimensional thoughts and feelings to two-dimensional surfaces.

A 20-year resident of Stow, Jaffee now sits in her studio at ArtSpace in Maynard where she spends 40 hours a week or more. Her studio is as it should be — cluttered, colorful, soaked in natural light. At the moment, she sits on a paint-stained chair eating a sandwich, drinking tea. She is taking a break from re-working one of her older paintings.

Where does all this come from? she is asked.

"I find it difficult talking about my work," she says apologetically. "I'm not good at it."

So, rather than talk about where all the images, thoughts, feelings come from, Jaffee talks about her resume: School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Bachelor of Fine Arts from Tufts. Solo exhibits at Boston's State House, Bentley College, Harbor Gallery at the University of Massachusetts, Charter Oak Gallery in Hartford. Group exhibits at, among a slew of others, Boston Psychoanalytic Society, Fletcher/Priest Gallery in Worcester, and on.

Jaffee has long ago stopped counting the number of paintings she's sold. She loves to see them go, she says. One that sticks out in her memory is the one a woman bought and then hired an interior decorator to design the room for the painting.

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JUDITH JAFFEE, LOCAL ARTIST

"That was something," says Jaffee, smiling and finishing off her tea.

How does your family, friends feel about your work, she's asked.

"They're very supportive," she says. "Even my husband whose favorite painter is Norman Rockwell."

Jaffee jokes about this. Her stuff, of course, is the antithesis of Rockwell. In Rockwell's creations everything is always alright, and everybody just loves the heck out of everybody else, and even when there is dissension the viewer knows that everything and everybody are going to be just fine and dandy, that everything will be worked out in a civilized way. There are no real problems in Rockwell land.

Not so with Jaffee's creations. Jaffee's creations, by her own description are grim, bleak. There is a painful hopelessness in her land. There is terror that is soul-sapping.

"But this stuff can be interpreted anyway you want," says Jaffee. "Everybody looking at it has their own interpretation. A lot of people have far more interesting interpretations than I have. A lot of people see things in them that I don't see."

Jaffee grew up in New York City, "when it was a really good place to grow up in." She was a terrible student, she says, but she always liked to draw. She was such a poor student, she says, that she never graduated from high school. Instead, at 14 years old she went to the Art Students League where she could hone her drawing and painting skills. From there she did what she could to earn a living.

It wasn't until adulthood that she went back to get high school equivalency credits, then go on to college — to the Boston Museum School and Tufts.

Today, Jaffee is a full-time artist. She paints well over eight hours a day and exhibits whenever she can.

"I'm doing what I was meant to do," she says. "This is not something I've decided to do; it's what I am, who I am. I do this because I have to."