

[Send to printer](#) [Close window](#)

Discovering artists at 'Undiscovered'

BY EMILY CHARRIER-BOTTS INDEX-TRIBUNE ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR



ROBBI PENGELLY/INDEX-TRIBUNE

Sonoma County is a hotbed of artistic activity, with every medium represented from film and photography to poetry and painting. While there is no dearth of artists, getting work seen by the public remains an elusive challenge only a handful successfully master.

Sonoma Valley Museum of Art is putting a spotlight on five Sonoma County artists who have never had their collections shown in a museum or been represented in a gallery. "Undiscovered" opens at the museum on Saturday, Jan. 14, with an opening reception set for today, Friday, Jan. 13, from 5 to 7 p.m.

"We wanted to find people who had never really shown their work publicly," said Kate Eilertsen, executive director of the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, who curated the exhibit in conjunction with Michael Schwager, a professor of art at Sonoma State University. "He and I wrote a letter to about 30 colleagues in the North Bay, asking for their suggestions for undiscovered artists," she said.

After looking at examples of their work, Eilertsen and Schwager made numerous studio visits to get a better sense of the artists and their work. From textiles to printmaking, all styles of art were considered. Ultimately, five whose talent and vision were executed most successfully were selected to showcase their work, including two Sonoma Valley residents.

Ryan Lely grew up in Sonoma and was quickly drawn to photography, specifically toy cameras and Polaroids. While he found success as an adult in photojournalism, he continued to pursue his more artistic work in his own time.

"I never know when I'm going to see something that catches my eye," Lely said. "I just feel like that's what I've always captured, the spaces in between. The things no one notices."

Three years ago, he began shooting with his iPhone using apps such as TiltShiftGen and CameraBag to manipulate the photos. The ease of the technology allows him to shoot whatever sparks his interest on the fly, bringing candidness and authenticity to his work. He said he often alters the photos in the field, within moments after capturing them.

"I manipulate the photo until it's done," he said. "That's often as I'm walking away from the scene. It's completely and utterly in the moment."

Lely has shown one piece at the museum's Biennial exhibition, but this will be the first time he is showing a complete collection of 19 works. His photos are displayed in hanging cellphone cases, giving the true-to-form scale of the work, as well as projected in a slideshow video.

"I felt it was important to have that digital element," he said of the slideshow, adding that it also allowed viewers to see a large format version of the work.

For conceptual artist Peter Hassen, also of Sonoma, working on the fly is all but impossible. His art, which whimsically explores discovery, time and space, takes time and planning to execute. One of his most well-known pieces, the "Values Project," was commissioned in the city of Napa, where he worked with children to paint words expressing basic human values, such as honor, tolerance and respect, in more than 500 parking spots across the city.

"People can take away whatever they want from those words," Hassen said.

His "Discovery Series" project brought him to beaches across the West Coast from Mexico to Washington state, where he buried 50 Buddha heads in the sand, which he expects will be unearthed randomly by passersby over the years.

"They'll have this moment of wonder and discovery. Where did this come from? What does this mean?" he said.

During the exhibition, Hassen arranged 50 Buddha heads within sacred geometry and religious icons to represent the buried pieces.

Finally, in his "Sacred Sculptures" work, he recreates large-scale religious figures such as Shiva and Horus. The sculptures, which weigh as much as 600 pounds, are then taken out into remote corners of the natural world. Left to be discovered, the project allows viewers to have the unique experience of finding a massive piece of manmade art hidden in the midst of vast wilderness. Hassen takes panoramic photographs of the icons in their natural space, which are

included in the exhibition.

"They are off the trail, but people can find them if they look," he said. "I've gone back and seen it, people leave rocks or pebbles to show they've been there."

Other exhibiting artists come from across Sonoma County. Textile artist Esther Traugot, of Sebastopol, weaves intricate coverings for natural elements, from twigs and shells to tiny jackets for wasps. Cathy Ellis, also of Sebastopol, explores romanticism and social critique in her lively, colorful paintings. Finally, Santa Rosa-based printmaker William Smith tackles the absurdities of modern society in expressive character cartoons that don't shy away from the grotesque.

"Undiscovered" will run through March 18 at the museum, with a series of public programs planned to allow visitors to interact with the artists. The first takes place Saturday, Jan. 21, at 3 p.m. with "Meeting of the Minds: Undiscovered Artists and Curators in Conversation."

The museum is located at 551 Broadway, in Sonoma. Museum hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday. Admission is \$5 for adults, free for museum members and students in grades K through 12. For details, visit www.svma.org or call 939-7862.