

Searching for an ART SCENE

■ Most citizens in places such as Grants Pass and Ashland fail to admire Southern Oregon's culture

By Sara Jarrett
Oregon Daily Emerald

Maybe it's the permeating blanket of fog, so thick its victims are caught inside like the stick of cotton candy cloud that has recently been dropped in the mud.

Well, if it's not the fog that's suppressing the art in Southern Oregon, then what is?

Grants Pass, Jacksonville, Medford and Ashland — driving through in that order from Eugene — make up the Rogue Valley and surrounding areas. Only two pages in an entertainment insert in the Medford Mail Tribune is needed to list all of the art galleries within a six-city proximity.

The valley is less than a 200-mile drive south of Eugene, but it may as well be another world.

The freeway peacefully winds between majestic forests and softly rolling hills, yet that natural beauty can't distract from an obviously abrupt change in culture once you reach the area. It's suddenly hard to breathe as exhaust billows from behind a pickup truck that's displaying a very big, very visible gun rack in its back window.

Though the number of talented artists in the area is few and far between, the main problem contributing to the lack of an art scene is the majority of citizens who fail to appreciate the beauty of such a thing.

The Neanderthal, a cave-man sculpture at the north side of Grants Pass, for instance, is classified as art by many who live there. Some believe the "art piece" is all their town needs.

The sculpture, which has greeted cars fresh off the freeway for nearly a decade, is the source of much controversy. The ones who want it removed think it's a vulgar sight. The majority, however, don't understand the negativity such a creature can cast on a community and think it's a historic symbol of the town's heritage.

This conservatism and subsequent closed-mindedness creates a problem for the local artists, however, who are trying to make a living by selling their creations. It seems they are forced to produce depictions of landscapes, local bridges and other well-known landmarks. Are these painters and sculptors compromising their visions, or are they all genuinely inspired by nature?

The Grants Pass Museum of Art is a mini-salvation from the sameness. The venue not only brings in traveling exhibits but also provides a place for local artists to display their creations without the threat of censorship. Two other reputable art galleries in the area are affiliated with Rogue Community College.

The choices get better the farther south one travels, though. Thinly-populated with less than 2,000 people, Jacksonville is seemingly an oasis in this desert of hunters and fishers.

Galleries such as Eklektix, which is owned by artist Jan Schmidt, feature nudes and more abstract art than most others. Another standout, Eugene Bennett's

Southern Oregon Snapshots

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Rogue Community College sponsors two art galleries in Grants Pass.

Eklektix, in Jacksonville, features nudes and more abstract art than other galleries. Eccentric Jacksonville resident Eugene Bennett specializes in oils and three-dimensional work.

Medford offers the Rogue Gallery & Art Center, which is not just a place to view art but also a venue to learn how to make art.

Private galleries dot Ashland's downtown streets and the First Friday of every month is set aside for show openings, artist demonstrations and participatory art events.

Schneider Museum of Art, located at Southern Oregon University, is the place to see more nationally-known, traveling exhibits.

gallery, specializes in oils and three-dimensional work, and Bennett is one of the better-known craftsmen in town. Locals know him as an eccentric man who regularly travels to New York to engage in self-enlightenment. These two galleries make up the town's art scene.

The whole town of Jacksonville "is a gem," says Tamara Archibald, the Administrative Assistant for the Rogue Gallery & Art Center in Medford, referring to the homey atmosphere and historical district.

Jacksonville does seem like a gem, especially coming straight from Grants Pass. It's a quaint village where everybody knows each other's name and nobody seems to drive over 25 mph.

Rogue Gallery & Art Center is the biggest venue in Medford and basically the only one if you don't count the few stores selling locals' wares. The gallery's windows are filled with decorated logs and more landscape portraits but is more than just a place to show artists' work.

"There are also rooms in the back that serve as classrooms," gallery volunteer Gunny Shurtz said. It's a venue to show art and teach art, she added.

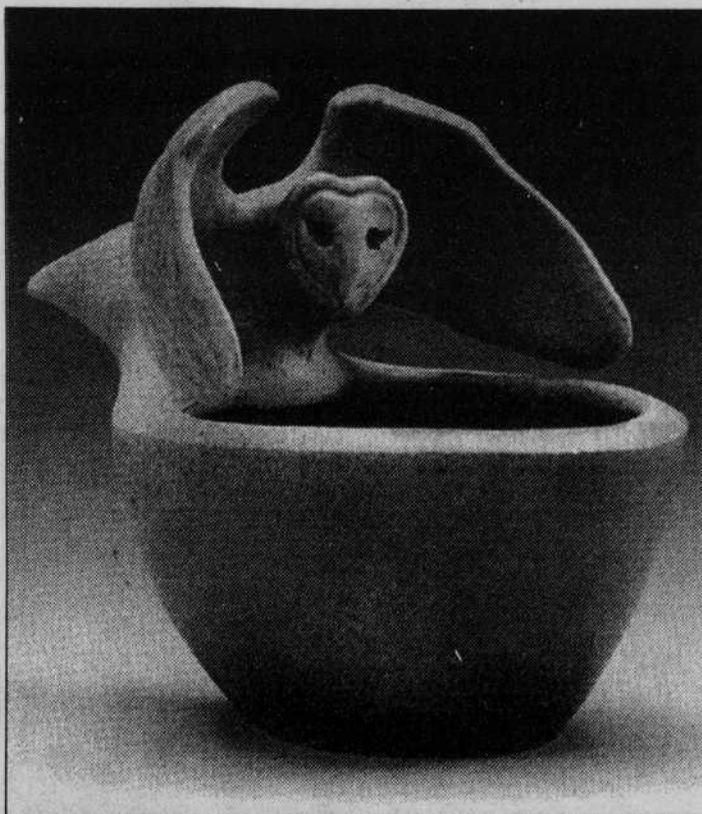
"But Ashland is really where it's at," Archibald said.

Ashland, the town farthest south on the list, certainly lives up to that statement.

The amount of small, private galleries is plentiful, though most don't exceed those found in the other three towns. It's just that there are more of them.

What makes Ashland unique, however, is two-fold. Most importantly, the community seems to be more open-minded and accepting of different types of art. In addition, Southern Oregon University makes Ashland its home, and, thanks to the school's Schneider Museum of Art, the town receives traveling exhibits that would otherwise be unavailable to the area.

Art in southern Oregon — the phrase seems like an oxymoron, but it's not. You just have to be willing to look past the Neanderthal and search a little.



Robert Jaffe Courtesy Rogue Gallery & Art Center
Homespun art, such as this owl bowl found at Medford's Rogue Gallery & Art Center, dominates the Southern Oregon cultural scene.

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