

TOP STORY

'Light and Stillness' exhibit blazes with ethereal beauty

By Pat Muir

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"Blouse" by Bev Byrnes. (Photo courtesy of Yakima Light Project)

If You Go

WHAT: Yakima Light Project's "Light and Stillness" exhibit.

WHEN: Through Sept. 30; opening reception is 5:30 p.m. today.

WHERE: Yakima Valley Museum, 2015 Tieton Drive, Yakima.

ADMISSION: Free.

INFORMATION:
www.yakimalightproject.org
(<http://www.yakimalightproject.org>),
509-248-0747.

A still-life painting of a blouse on a hook has no right to be compelling.

But there's Seattle artist Bev Byrnes' painting of a blouse on a hook, and here we are compelled. The painting doesn't "say" anything — well, anything except "Blouse," its plainly stated title—and still it demands attention and consideration. Part of that is the apparent effort and Byrnes' mastery of technique. The oil painting easily could be mistaken for a photograph, such is her precision and attention to detail.

But a bigger part of the work's appeal, and a key to all of the work that Byrnes will exhibit in the Yakima Light Project show "Light and Stillness" that opens this evening, is that the more you look at it, the more you realize it captures things a photograph never could.

Byrnes, a 50-year-old Yakima native, imbues her work with a quality of light that doesn't actually occur in the real world. Or if it does, it's fleeting, there for an instant and gone before you can even name it. That she's able to create that quality, to seemingly capture light itself, in still lifes is what makes "Blouse" compelling. There's meaning in the painting, inasmuch as it may mean something specific to any person who sees it, but the only quote-unquote message in it is its own aesthetic quality.

"I'm not a conceptual painter," Byrnes said in an interview late last month. "I'm drawn to what I find beautiful."

Her work, along with that of Vashon Island painter Erin Schulz, makes up the exhibit, which will hang at the Yakima Valley Museum through Sept. 30. Like Byrnes, Schulz is a Yakima native who paints still lifes.

Their paintings are strictly literal. If there is a philosophical or symbolic meaning to them at all, it has to do with notions of direct perception and representation. Yet, owing largely to how each of them creates and uses light, there is enough depth to the work to hold a viewer's eye long enough for careful consideration.

The style is ideal for the Yakima Light Project's mission, said Yesenia Hunter, director of the light project. She didn't select the artists for this show — that was up to previous director Laurie Kanyer — but Hunter was immediately taken with the work.

"I came in as director with work already set before me," Hunter said. "Once I contacted Bev and talked with her and then saw some of her work, I was thrilled."

In addition to both artists having grown up in Yakima, with an understanding of the way the area's abundant sunlight colors life, Byrnes' work actually includes pieces of the Yakima Valley and other places she's visited. Literal pieces — she makes her own oil paints, using pigments from materials she grinds by hand.

"It means much more to work with material you've made with your own hands," Byrnes said.

That includes rocks, sulfur, corroded metal, mercury — anything from which she can draw color and texture. And the fact that she makes the paint herself means she can manipulate and customize those elements to suit very specific needs. Hand-ground pigments, for instance, have a different texture than uniformly ground pigments when they're added to oil.

"It's a whole different feel," Byrnes said. "I do think there's a glow to it. There's something different about it."

To Andy Granitto, the museum's curator of exhibits, that level of artist participation at every step of the process is intriguing.

"In the old days, that was a whole skill people learned," Granitto said of Byrnes' paint-making. "It can provide depth and luminosity."

The museum is hosting this Light Project exhibit because the Light Project Gallery lost its home in The Seasons Performance Hall last month when The Seasons' board voted to end the partnership amid financial uncertainty. Kanyer and Hunter have pledged to keep the project's mission going and are working to find homes for future shows.

"If you think about light, you never know where light is going to show up," Kanyer said.