





Southwest Florida artists gauge the area's artistic temperament

Time was (not that long ago) when people came to Southwest Florida for the warmth and relaxed pace and little else. Maybe you did some fishing; of course you went to the beach. But you didn't think of the region as a cultural mecca. Art was something you sought out in big cities or on Florida's other coast, if you even thought of it at all.

But there is something about the sea that seems to draw artists the way that certain plants attract butterflies. Wherever there is proximity to water, an artist colony tends to grow. So it's not surprising that such an occurrence has happened here. Some big names in art have made their homes in Southwest Florida—Robert Rauschenberg on Captiva, Ikki Matsumoto on Sanibel, Jonathan Green just outside of Naples. The region is becoming known well enough for its art that national festivals are held annually and real estate and travel agents now point to the art scene as a key component of the area's quality of life.

by Janina Birtolo | photo by ImpactUH

From left to right: Local artists Susan Bridges, Greg Biolchini, Natalie Guess (seated), and Jo-Ann Sanborn gather at the Art League of Bonita Springs.

Those artists who have largely built their careers in Southwest Florida witnessed firsthand the evolution of this state of the arts. They made it through the lean days and managed to find ways to keep going. They helped build interest in and organizations for the arts, opened galleries, and traveled to other places to spread the word. Though pleased with how far this region has come in artistic awareness and appreciation, they see room for **more**—and the very good possibility that it will arrive soon.

Practically a Native

Ft. Myers artist Greg Biolchini has one of the longest-range views of the region's art scene. He arrived here in 1958, when he was only ten years old. "When my family came to Bonita Springs, there were only 1,500 people living

there," he recalls. "And the art scene was nothing to speak of."

Biolchini didn't let the paucity of resources deter him from following an artistic path. "It never crossed my mind to be anything else but a painter," he says. So he studied on his own, refining his technique through trial and error. At age fourteen, he was doing charcoal portraits at his father's bar. Then he was given a box of pastels and was dazzled by the colors and possibilities. Today, his pastels are recognized widely (one was recently included in the book *The Best of Pastel*), and he teaches throughout the country. He also paints in oils. In either medium, his soft, romantic style attracts attention and awards.

"I very often tend toward a looser realism," Biolchini says. "I've been called an impressionist, but my work is more loose than impressionistic. Right now I'm having a lot of fun playing with the materials as materials, letting the paint look like paint and allowing it to become part of the integrity of the design. I've done well, much better than I would have imagined."

Biolchini found his success even though the region didn't have a thriving art scene. In his early years, he worked odd jobs to pay the bills and painted as an avocation. In 1978, he moved to Ft. Myers and set up a studio downtown.

"That was probably the first time I thought of myself as just an artist," he says. "It was a very small world then. All the artists knew each other fairly well. During the 1980s, we had seven or eight different artists all in the same building. We would have shows and have more than five hundred people sign the guest books. They would get all dressed up because it was something to do."

Most of the other artists moved away, but Biolchini's stellar portraits helped him gain a following and attract

Ft. Myers artist Greg Biolchini (below right) uses pastels and oils to create pieces like *Blind Pass* (below) and *Snowy Egret* (bottom).



IMAGES COURTESY OF GREG BIOLCHINI

commission work. Networking, teaching, and marketing his work outside the region also built his stature and career. Now, however, he's ready to start again in his own backyard. The reason: the area's growth.

"Having a much larger population has opened a lot of doors," he explains. "The art associations, not that long ago, were primarily a bunch of retired folks. Now they host major, immense outdoor shows with artists from all over, and they attract a good audience.

"It's amazing how many people now understand design," Biolchini continues. "The average person has become more sophisticated and has more exposure and more awareness."

Convergent Paths

When Phil Fisher arrived in Naples in 1970, he found much the same dearth of artistic resources as Biolchini describes. "There was not an art scene," he says. "There were a few galleries down on Third Street and a gallery on Fifth Avenue. That was the first place that hung a work of mine. And there was a frame shop that had a little gallery space. The owner of that was the first person to purchase my paintings. He turned around and sold them for a lot more."

Ten years after Fisher arrived, artist Natalie Guess—who eventually became Fisher's wife—moved to town. She was fresh out of college and had been working and teaching classes as an art specialist for the park system in Bloomington, Illinois.

"I thought I would see about doing that same type of thing here," Guess recalls. "I went to the City of Naples, and the response I got was, 'Oh, you mean they *paid* you to do that?' That was my first impression of the art scene here."

Fisher works in oils and watercolors, capturing the play of light on the rich local environment. His subject matter and style have a ready appeal, and people were drawn to his work from the beginning. Guess had a



tougher road, working in a medium that is less familiar—batik.

"When I was doing the outdoor shows, occasionally one person every three shows would look at my work and say, 'I saw that in Africa' or 'I saw that in Indonesia,'" explains Guess. "Now a lot of people know what batik is. If ten people walk in [to our shop], maybe seven know. I have to explain a lot less."

That's not the only indication of the growing acceptance of art Guess and Fisher have seen. They point to the art centers in Bonita Springs, Marco Island, and Naples and to the wealth of classes now offered. They note the

Batik works by Naples-based artist and gallery owner Natalie Guess include *Mangrove Silhouettes* (top) and *The Crayton House* (above).



Since his arrival in Naples in 1970, Phil Fisher has enjoyed a following for his oils and watercolors like *Bonita Beach* (above) and *Old Naples Beachwalk* (above right).



number of galleries and the fact that people aren't just buying something "to go with the furniture" but are willing to buy art for art's sake. They add with delight that many more artists have moved here or come here to teach.

"In the beginning, I knew or knew of every artist in town," Guess says. "At this point, I couldn't even tell you one-fourth of them."

A disappointment, however, is that the influx of artists hasn't greatly increased the respect local artists receive. Guess and Fisher carry works by nine other artists in their gallery, but most must rely on the shows put on by the art associations to get their work seen.

"It's tough to get into the galleries," Fisher notes. "I think there is a wealth of talent here. I just wish there were more places that would sell good local art. It would be great if there was a wonderful fine arts school here, a good educational facility that both

artists and patrons could benefit [from]. I would love to see that."

Building in Bonita

Increasing artistic educational opportunities is a dream that Susan Bridges shares, and it's one she's living. As executive director of the Art League of Bonita Springs, she oversees the programming and exhibitions at the group's new art center. There, adults and children can hone talents in painting, drawing, sculpture, stone-carving, photography, print-making, pottery, and computer art.

That's a far cry from what Bridges found when she first moved to the area in 1984. She arrived not as an executive but as an artist (a role she continues to this day), creating sculptures and sculptural, three-dimensional paintings. Her husband had fallen in love with the area, but what she saw unsettled her.

"I was a little concerned that I did-

n't see much art," she admits. "There was no Philharmonic [Center for the Arts] and only a couple of galleries. When they decided to build the Phil, people said, 'No one will ever drive that far.'

"When I first got here," she continues, "I brought two sculptures to a Naples show. The woman I met said, 'We only do art.' When I asked what that meant, she said, 'You know, only paintings. We don't do clay or sculpture.'"

For someone who had come from the Art Institute of Chicago, that kind of reception was totally unexpected. But Bridges persevered, marketing her work outside of the area and continuing to conduct traveling study tours for the Institute. "That way it didn't hurt as much that an art scene wasn't here yet," she says. "And I began to think maybe I could be an instrument for change."

That opportunity arrived in 1999, when Bridges was tired of traveling and the Art League of Bonita Springs began to dream of a permanent home. She agreed to start part-time, but the momentum of the fundraising campaign carried her along to a full-time position. By April of 2000, the first two buildings of the art center had opened. Just two and a half years later, the next two structures opened their doors.

"The Art League of Bonita Springs had no home," Bridges explains. "So their exhibits took place in other places, banks and churches. Probably 99 percent of the membership was hobbyist artists, which is something pretty wonderful to say. But in 1999, they decided to take a small office space and had a place to exhibit. That increased membership and that led to increased diversity. That's when you start to see change."

Now the league hosts twelve to fourteen exhibitions a year (in addition to conducting classes year-round). Many provide opportunities for local artists. Others are traveling exhibits Bridges hopes will expand the artistic sensibilities of the public.

"We're creating a lot of excitement now," she says. "But I don't know that [we] would have back in 1984."

Yet Bridges sees the job as incomplete. Now, her board is undertaking the drafting of a four-year forecast, looking to see what's still needed and how the league might be able to meet those needs. She'd like to grow the group's fledgling dance and theater program so that the center becomes a full arts resource. Meanwhile, she



Susan Bridges serves as executive director of the Art League of Bonita Springs, which held its first show in the early 1960s (below). She's also an artist herself, creating pieces such as *He Loves Me—He Loves Me Not* (left) and *Habitats II* (bottom).



continues her own art, away from the region so as not to muddle her two distinct roles.

Blooming on Marco

Jo-Ann Sanborn is a relative newcomer to the area, having arrived “only” in 1993. That timing, though, allowed her to see the evolution of art appreciation in condensed form. “Most people then thought of [Marco Island] as a beach community,” she says. “They didn’t

tend to put fine art in their homes. There were only two galleries. Now there are at least ten, and more every day.”

Sanborn, who paints somewhat impressionistic/expressionistic scenes of the Everglades, also discovered that few artists seemed to be painting the environment she found so captivating. Fortunately, she learned that people connected with her work, as if they could identify with it for having seen the places she paints.

As happy a situation as that was, Sanborn was also pleased to note the growth of art on Marco Island. “I think people [here] looked to Naples for quality art,” she says. “But now people are bringing that art consciousness to the island....I think there seems to be a lot of people now who want something real, an original piece of art.”

One offshoot of that increased interest in art has been the formation of the Marco Island Foundation for the Arts, of which Sanborn is president. Formed in 2003, the group seeks to promote the concept of art in public spaces. It sponsored its first major event this season with Art Quest, an ambitious project to bring fifteen sculptures to Marco Island from all over the world.

“We think art is a powerful cultural force,” Sanborn says. “It adds vitality to a community and brings people together in a good way. We have some really interesting pieces, from a very recognizable baby elephant to five marble pillars that form a riddle. There truly is something for everyone.”

And that, of course, is the overall idea: to bring art to the masses in such a way that everyone can appreciate how art lifts and unfolds the spirit and makes life richer. Southwest Florida may have been an arts backwater for years, but now it’s finding its voice and shouting loud enough for all the world to hear. 🌴

Based in Naples, freelance writer Janina Birtolo has been writing about Southwest Florida for the past fourteen years.

President of the Marco Island Foundation for the Arts, Jo-Ann Sanborn also paints scenes of the Everglades like *Favorite Places* (below) and *Afternoon Sky* (bottom).



A New Home for the Arts

Imagine. That's the big word at the Florida Arts Cultural Center, and with good reason. An old federal building in downtown Ft. Myers is in the midst of a magical transformation.

Where lawyers and clients once whispered or shouted about cases, visual art now decks the walls. Where court offices would hum with the sound of reports being compiled, there are plans to host art workshops for children and adults.

How did this transformation come to be? Credit Jim Griffith, executive director and chairman of the board of Florida Arts, Inc. He saw an empty space and envisioned a place for the arts.

"I'm a performer myself, and I've played all over the country," says Griffith, a violist and member of the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra. "But not in the city where I live. When I saw that the federal building was vacated, I saw possibilities."

The circa-1933 building originally served as a post office for Ft. Myers. In 1965, it was converted to a federal courthouse and used until 1998, when the federal government moved from the premises. Two years later, the building was sold to the City of Ft. Myers.

Griffith joined forces with other arts lovers and formed the non-profit Florida Arts, which lobbied the city to turn the facility into an

arts center. The organization has already demolished the non-historical parts of the building and



As executive director and chairman of the board of Florida Arts, Inc., Jim Griffith is helping to bring the Florida Arts Cultural Center to downtown Ft. Myers. The center will be housed in a circa-1933 former post office and federal courthouse.

started renovations. It has also hosted fundraising events in order to share its vision and build support. When completed, the Florida Arts Cultural Center plans to offer traveling exhibitions, space for local visual and performing artists, classes, room for other organizations, and joint ventures with Florida Gulf Coast University and Edison College.

The next fundraiser is set for November 4, 2006. For more information or to get involved in the project, call 239-337-1933 or visit www.fl-arts.org.

