

OLY ARTS

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Debra Van Tuinen: Creating Light and Community



Debra Van Tuinen has received many accolades for her paintings, which were included in the 2004 Florence Biennale and have hung in U.S. embassies, but her latest award recognizes not her art but her courage and her commitment to Olympia. Van Tuinen — who opened a downtown studio and gallery in August 2020 — also recently received a 2022 Economic Courage Award from the Thurston Economic Development Council.

“Debra’s gallery launched during the throes of the ‘Stay Home, Stay Safe’ lockdown,” said Michael Cade, the council’s executive director. “She took that corner office space and created a light on that corner that told people, ‘We will get through this.’ The arts are a driver of our local economy, and she has taken a leadership role.”



A blue, encaustic work by Van Tuinen



"Yellow" by Debra Van Tuinen

Cade's metaphor is an apt one: Creating light is what Van Tuinen does in her multilayered paintings — some in encaustic, some in oil over acrylic, and many incorporating sumi ink — and in her prints. The series she's been working on since 2019 is called "Light Revealed," and art critic Doug Meyer, quoted on Van Tuinen's website, described her paintings, often inspired by Northwest waters, as radiant. They bask in the reflected light of a physical universe beyond the picture plane," he wrote.

"I've always been quite attracted to the water, so I do a lot of things on the water, but also what's really important to me is the light and how it affects my work," she told OLY ARTS. "The encaustic is nice, because there are so many translucent layers. You can see through them when you walk around them. The paintings change color as you walk around, because the light is going through those

layers. I think I've achieved that in the oils and acrylic-oils as well. ... It's just like when you're walking by water and you see it change."

She's also been experimenting with ways to create layers of texture and color in prints — painting on silk glued to a board, then applying ink and wiping it off, or painting with watercolor on polyester film and combining multiple layers, she said. "I really enjoy working on the prints because I get to play and then I get inspired," she added.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Van Tuinen found her art shifting and changing. "Going through these times does affect my work," she said. "I got a little darker to begin with and then brought in some color and lightness again." For many pieces, she started with sumi ink and then added paint. "I covered up the darkness a bit, but you can still see it."



Van Tuinen sits at her desk in her downtown Olympia studio

The move to the downtown studio, with 14-foot ceilings and big windows overlooking Fourth Avenue, affected Van Tuinen's art, too. "When I first moved, it took a while to paint again, because it was a new space and everything was so perfect," she said. These days, there's paint on the floor of the room she works in, and she's downtown nearly every weekday and many Saturdays, too. "I get so absorbed," she said, "but I try to do other things, too. I would be here every day if I didn't think about it.

"I have really sold a lot of work here," she added. "A lot of people found me when I first got here." During the early days of the

pandemic, a lot of galleries were closed, and these days, she's less focused on sending work out of town and seeking shows, and more focused on making new work. "I've got enough going on right here," she said. "I'm really focused on being here creating and bringing people in, and people are buying."

Van Tuinen has also been mentoring other artists and entrepreneurs, and she hopes to inspire more artists to work in downtown Olympia. "I want to get more people down here," she said. "You have to have a vision to be able to make that happen. People say, 'Your space is so great. I want that space.' There are a lot of great spaces."