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TOP STORY

GALLERY | 'SIGHT BEYOND LIMITS'

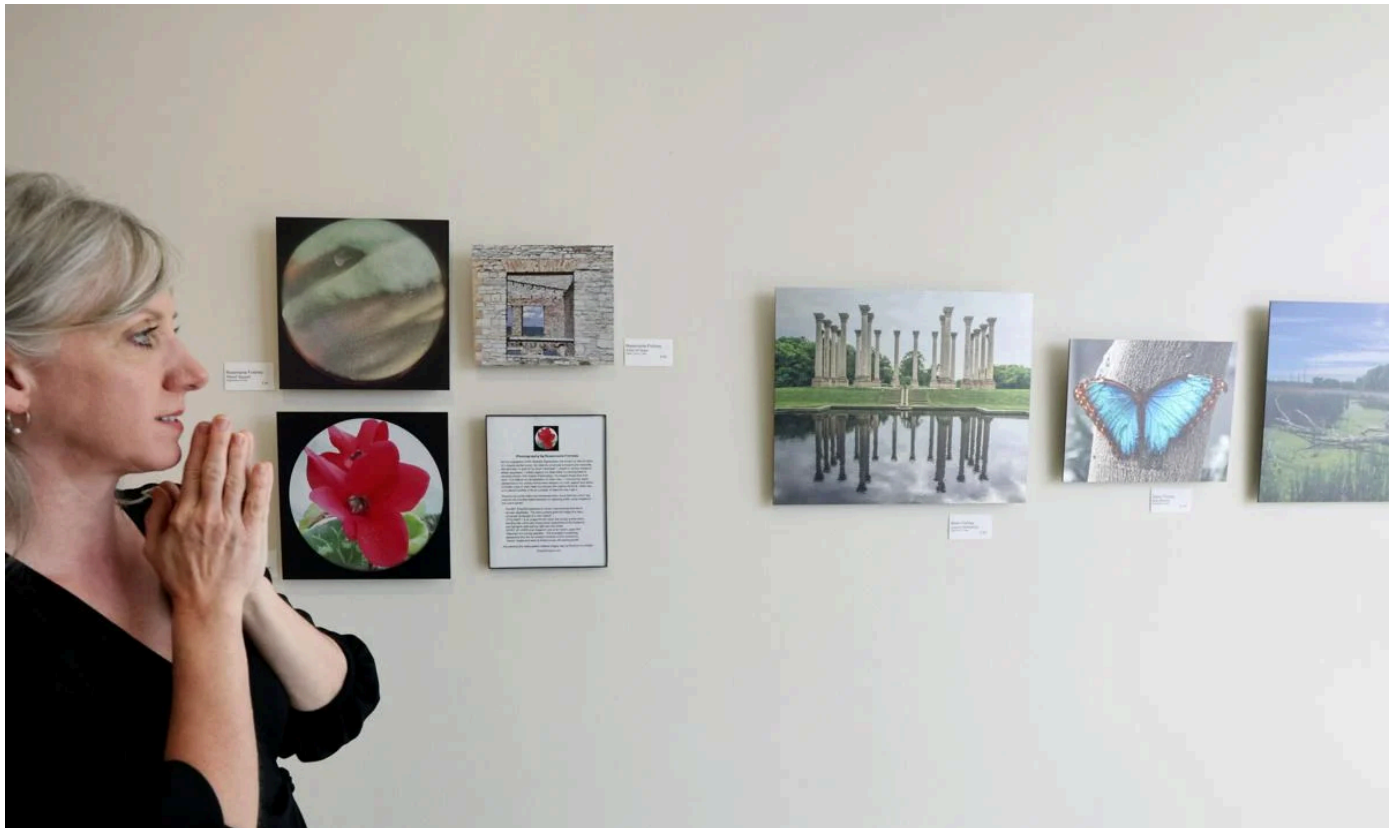
Vision gallery features work by low-vision artists in 'Sight Beyond Limits'

Gayle Worland | Wisconsin State Journal

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When Lynn Olson was invited to exhibit some of her paintings in “Sight Beyond Limits,” she immediately came on board.

The show highlights the work of area artists whose vision impairments have inspired and enriched their art. For Olson, that meant paintings that reflect the “pixelated” way she sees the visual world.



Christina Martin-Wright, executive director of Arts for All Wisconsin, points out the photographic work on display by Rosemarie Fortney and her daughter, Alison Fortney. Both artists have retinitis pigmentosa, which causes vision loss.

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“I’ve always had this sense of large chunks of color,” said Olson, 60, who started losing part of her vision at age 30 and now is considered legally blind due to a rare genetic condition. She named her art practice, now a successful business, “Big Blurry Paintings.”

Olson, who lives in Madison, is one of eight Wisconsin artists whose work is featured in **“Sight Beyond Limits,” on display through May** at the Mandelbaum and Albert Family Vision Gallery.



Artwork by Wisconsin artists with vision loss lines the walls of the gallery at the McPherson Eye Research Institute near UW Hospital. “Sight Beyond Limits” runs through May 31 and was co-curated by gallery coordinator Gail Stirr, left. At right is Christina Martin-Wright, executive director of Arts for All Wisconsin.

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The small gallery welcomes visitors to the ninth floor of the Wisconsin Institutes for Medical Research, 1111 Highland Ave., primarily staff and researchers at the McPherson Eye Research Institute, as a way to connect scientists with art that relates to their field of vision research.

The gallery is also open to the public and hosts three exhibits a year, including **the annual “Cool Science Image Contest”** show that features astounding yet beautiful images from researchers, faculty and students at the university.

For “Sight Beyond Limits” the gallery partnered with **Arts for All Wisconsin**, a statewide nonprofit that promotes the arts of all kinds for people with disabilities of all kinds. Arts for All has a large stable of gifted visual artists, including Olson, and helped select works for the current show.

Arts for All also sells artworks on its website, **www.artsforallwi.org**, and hosts a popular booth in Madison **each summer at Art Fair on the Square** selling the work of its members.

“One of the missions of the (vision) gallery is to highlight the connections between vision science and art,” said “Sight Beyond Limits” co-curator Rodney Schreiner. “Since that’s also one of the goals of Arts for All, we thought let’s collaborate on something — because they have the artists.”

Media in the show ranges from weaving to photography to paintings. Along with Olson, the artists include Ralph Curtis, Alison Fortney, Rosemarie Fortney, Duncan Hamilton, Albert Schmiege, Mark Weber and the late Beatrice Peyer.



Rodney Schreiner, right, co-curated "Sight Beyond Limits" at the McPherson Eye Research Institute. One of the featured artists is Ralph Curtis, who created the photographs at left and has Stargardt disease, which causes vision loss.

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Statements by each artist — about their sight and about their art — hang on the walls along with the artworks. That's "primarily so that the researchers in this building can take a look (and think, for example) 'Oh, I'm working on something with age-related macular degeneration, or retinitis pigmentosa, and now I have a better of idea of someone who might have that condition,'" said Gail Stirr, a consultant and gallery coordinator at the **McPherson Eye Research Institute**.

Some of the artists invited to exhibit in "Sight Beyond Limits" had relevant pieces on hand, while others made them expressly for the show.

“Being able to reach out to these specific artists with this opportunity in mind, I know propelled some productivity — which is wonderful, to have that sense of purpose,” said Christina Martin-Wright, executive director of Arts for All Wisconsin.

Albert Schmeige’s paintings, for example, are full of bold colors, contrast and texture, “despite having no central vision, poor depth perception, and colorblindness due to Stargardt macular degeneration,” Schmeige wrote in his artist statement.



Art in "Sight Beyond Limits" includes works by Albert Schmiege.

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“While I cannot appreciate my art as a sighted person would — three feet away from the canvas and the image is unrecognizable to me — my paintings are my passion and my relaxation,” he wrote. “I can get lost in my work for hours at a time. When people connect with a piece, it is the greatest feeling in the world!”

A closing reception for “Sight Beyond Limits” at the Mandelbaum and Albert Family Vision Gallery will be held May 31.

Olson, who spent her career working in the field of promoting sustainable food, now creates art in a variety of media, from mosaics and wood carving to 3D sculpture with found objects. A friend sponsors her studio space at the **Bodgery, a maker space at 740 Oscar Ave.**

After years of wondering what was wrong with her vision and not getting answers, finally having a diagnosis was somewhat of a moment of liberation, Olson said. It inspired her to become an artist full-time and to throw herself into her work.

“I’ve been a visual person all my life,” she said. “To me, art is the act. It’s a verb. In the end, you have a ‘thing’ you created. But making the art” is the real reward, she said.



Gallery coordinator Gail Stirr talks about drawings by Mark Weber on display through May 31 in the Mandelbaum and Albert Family Vision Gallery.

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