

Questioning perceptions

U.S. Embassy Astana, Kazakhstan ART in Embassies Exhibition



U.S. Ambassador Kenneth J.
Fairfax

As we worked with the Art in Embassies program to put together a collection of works by American artists for display in our residence in Astana, my wife and I focused on art that would invite viewers to stop and think in such a way as to encourage dialog about Kazakhstan, the United States, the relations between our countries and the world around us. To achieve this, we chose artworks that explored two broad themes. The first theme was unexpected similarities between the USA and Kazakhstan. Our two countries are so far apart geographically and historically that many people fail to realize how amazing similar they can be. Paintings such as Allan Friedlander's "Majestic Parade," Russ Vogt's "Rolling Hills" and Marilyn Higginson's "Across Alvord" all depict American landscapes that could well be mistaken for scenes from Kazakhstan. Cecily Barth Firestein's "Time is But The Stream To Go A-Fishing In" approaches this theme of unexpected similarities from another angle by reminding viewers that both countries are "mixing bowls" that owe much to both Western and Asian culture and history.



Allan Friedlander, *MAJESTIC PARADE*, Acrylic on gallery wrapped canvas, Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco, California

In choosing all of these works of art, our intention is not to fool the viewer but instead to cause him or her to pause and think, a process that we hope will lead people to question whether the USA and Kazakhstan are really as distant from each other as many people suppose -- and how we might grow even closer. The second theme we pursued via our choice of artwork was that of questioning perceptions of what is and what must be. Having gained its independence from the former Soviet Union on December 16, 1991, Kazakhstan is a very young country that is, quite literally, still in the process of creating itself. While many basic institutions of government are now well established, the people of Kazakhstan as well as its leaders continue to embrace change as they develop uniquely Kazakhstani approaches to foreign policy, national economic policy and many other aspects of their



Russ Vogt, #318 *ROLLING HILLS*, undated, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist, Plymouth, Minnesota



Marilyn Higginson, *ACROSS ALVORD*, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist, Sheridan, Oregon

country. This is yet another way in which the United States and Kazakhstan are remarkably similar. The United States of America has embraced change from the earliest days of our nation when those visionary leaders we now refer to as our "Founding Fathers" set about constructing a whole new type of nation and government. The changes initiated over 230 years ago are continuing today as we Americans continue to remake our country.



Cecily Firestein, *TIME IS BUT THE STREAM TO GO A-FISHING IN*, 2009, Mixed media monotype, Courtesy of the artist, New York, New York

Sharon Cosgrove's four-part series depicting air, earth, water and fire combine elements of realism and fantasy with references to traditional conceptions of our universe that are shared by both the West and the East. In this way, the paintings strike us as being at once familiar and yet slightly jarring, thereby encouraging the viewer to examine each painting -- as well as his/her personal conceptions of what is and what must be -- more closely. The perspective of looking out through windows extends the metaphor by inviting viewers to mentally compare where they stand now, in the



Sharon Cosgrove, *WIND*, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of Janet Sheen, Malibu, California



George Soppelsa, *HELIOS ITALICUS*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, Courtesy of the artist, East Hartford, Connecticut

"interior" or present, to where they could be. George Soppelsa employs a similar visual metaphor by challenging viewers' perceptions of reality. I believe that "Smoky Hollow" challenges the viewer to look inward to examine differences



George Soppelsa, *SMOKY HOLLOW*, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, Courtesy of the artist, East Hartford, Connecticut

between what is and what they perceive while works such as "Helios Italicus" and "Motion Capsules" broadly invite viewers to question what is real and what is imagined.

We hope that the cumulative impact on the viewer of these superficially very different works of art will be to encourage an open dialog in which all of us feel comfortable exploring our own assumptions about the world around us.

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The ART in Embassies Program was conceived in 1963 and currently exhibits more than 3,500 original works of loaned art by U.S. citizens. The Program is a unique blend of art, diplomacy, and culture that promotes dialog and presents the artistic accomplishments of the people of the United States. In 2013, ART in Embassies Program will celebrate its 50th anniversary.