

# Palo Alto Weekly

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## Walk this way

*Palo Alto's First Friday Art Walk offers a fun night on the town*

by Robyn Israel

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Using marble mined from the same quarry Michelangelo used would probably inspire any artist.

"Sonnet," sculpted by Richard Erdman, bears such a pedigree. Made from white Carrara marble, the slender yet curvaceous piece looks like it belongs in a Venetian palazzo.

But on this night, the regal sculpture is housed inside the Bryant Street Gallery, one of six galleries participating in the city's First Friday Art Walk. The event, which kicked off in January, takes place from 6 to 9 p.m. on the first Friday of each month and includes galleries located in and around University Avenue, all within walking distance of one another. Other arts groups include Art21, Meadowlark Gallery, the Pacific Art League, Torrefazione Italia Cafe and Voshan Fine Arts Gallery. Most venues hold their own artists' opening receptions, and offer a variety of music, entertainment and complimentary food and beverages.

The First Friday Art Walk is primarily the brainchild of Deb Killeen, marketing director for the Pacific Art League, and Elizabeth Borelli, a private art consultant who also organizes shows for Torrefazione Italia Cafe. Both recognized that the recent downturn in the economy -- and the loss of Hang Gallery and Gallery Europa -- forces existing galleries to refocus marketing efforts and ensure their businesses continue to thrive.

"The galleries in downtown Palo Alto rival San Francisco in terms of quality and creativity," Killeen said. "We just need to work together to help people to recognize that."

On Feb. 6, I set out on a rainy evening to discover what this event is like. Like many, I was familiar with the First Thursday art walks held at San Francisco galleries, but had never participated in that event. At my first stop, the Pacific Art League, I spoke with Executive Director Claudia Morgan, who informed me that every city in which she has lived -- New Orleans, Santa Fe, Columbus -- has hosted such an event. Why not Palo Alto?

"Most of the galleries are open on Fridays anyway, so it's just a matter of keeping the right attitude. It's not that big an effort," Morgan said. "And I've seen many people who've never come in here before."

That night, the Pacific Art League was gearing up for Valentine's Day, with an exhibition dedicated to the theme of "Love and Lust." Mandolinist Al Fabrizio helped create a romantic atmosphere in which patrons could peruse a variety of art work, ranging from heart-filled collages to paintings of couples. Tasty offerings included wine and Hershey's kisses.

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Michele St. Pierre, a native of Seattle, said her city had hosted a similar event in the old Pioneer Square area, and she had high hopes for Palo Alto.

"It's just starting up, but I think it will get there," St. Pierre said. "It just takes a while."

My next stop was Bryant Street Gallery, a smaller, more intimate venue specializing in work by emerging American artists and established names in the contemporary art world.

"There are plenty of people who can afford to buy art, who can support the local merchants," owner Karen Imperial said. "And we need to have art and artists -- without it life is boring."

Patron Laura Page, a resident of San Jose, remarked on Erdman's majestic piece, clearly the centerpiece of the gallery that evening.

"This is fabulous -- it should be surrounded by mirrors. And no matter how long you have it, it will *always* be interesting."

Next stop: VOSHAN Fine Arts Gallery, featuring an eclectic collection of original works by local, national and international artists. That night, the gallery was hosting a reception in honor of Capitola artist Marie Sarni. Her abstract works hung the entire length of one wall and boasted such titles as "Marrakesh," "Late Autumn in Umbria" and "New England Winter." Bold colors, rather than concrete images, conjured up images of exotic, faraway places.

VOSHAN owner Siavosh Shahrestani said he was really impressed by Sarni's adventurous palette.

"She has a great sense of color and harmony. She uses browns, which you don't often see," Shahrestani said.

Those warm sand colors, Sarni said, were inspired by her numerous trips to Morocco.

"If you sit in a restaurant, you'll see that the ceiling is carved wood, the upholstery has a beautiful design and there are beautiful Oriental rugs. Even the clothes they wear are beautiful. Your eyes have a feast when you're there," said Sarni, who has studied with Richard Diebenkorn, Nathan Oliviera of Stanford University, and her mentor, the late Wally Hedrick, a teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute.

The rain had started falling more heavily by the time I entered Torrefazione Italia Café, where the colorful and whimsical works of Sonya Paz were on display. Entitled "Faces and Places," the exhibition drew heavily from such genres as pop art, Cubism and Surrealism. Peering at the bold shapes and vibrant colors, it is clear that Paz has been influenced by such artists as Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol. Her "Two Water Drops Flirting," for instance, showcased beautiful shades of blue and intersecting circles, while illuminating the playful exchange between the two droplets.

Here, again, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with the showcased artist, who said her acrylic paintings combine "traditional elements with a modern flair."

Her signature style, developed over the last 25 years, intrigued Borelli, who arranged the show at Torrefazione Italia Café and is also the co-coordinator for the First Friday Art Walk.

"I'm looking for original artists who've had some exhibition experience, who have a consistent, unique style, and she definitely does," Borelli said.

Next stop: Meadowlark Gallery, where more than 400 American artists are represented in various media, including glass, ceramics, jewelry, wood, fiber, metal, paper, furniture, lamps and mirrors. Fanciful, hand-painted mirrors of different shapes, located to the right of the entrance, immediately caught my eye, each with their own positive expressions, such as "Live Life To The Fullest," "Seize the Day" and "Be A Star." All were the handiwork of Des Moines, Iowa artist Sarah Grant-Hutchinson.

"Sticks," a hand-painted flag of California by Grant-Hutchinson, used various words and expressions to represent the Golden State and its history, including "Hollywood Here We Come," "1945 U.N. Charter" and "Detention Camps for Japanese Americans." Inside the trademark bear were depictions of the state's diverse topography, ranging from oceans to desert to mountains.

It was around 9 p.m. by the time I arrived at the last gallery, Art21, where a band was playing and patrons were still milling about the large space. In another homage to Valentine's Day, "Romance and Figures" was the theme of the gallery's exhibition. Owner and artist Susan Kraft proudly showed me one of her works, which had been inspired by a model whose entire body had been covered in paint. Entitled "Strings to My Heart," the acrylic piece showed a dorsal view of the woman, who was standing upright.

By this point, I could barely stand upright myself, so I prepared to call it a night. It had not been the best night weather-wise, but that had not prevented many people from enjoying an evening of art, music and food in Palo Alto. For locals not thrilled at the idea of driving up to San Francisco on a Friday evening, this event offers a fun and somewhat different experience.

*What:* First Friday Art Walk.

*Where:* The participating galleries include Art21, 539 Alma, (650) 566-1381, [www.art21.us](http://www.art21.us); Bryant Street Gallery, 520 Bryant St., (650) 321-8155, [www.bryantstreet.com](http://www.bryantstreet.com); Meadowlark Gallery, 516 University Ave., (650) 330-1490, [www.meadowlarkgalleries.com](http://www.meadowlarkgalleries.com); Pacific Art League, 668 Ramona St., (650) 321-3891, [www.pacificartleague.org](http://www.pacificartleague.org); Torrefazione Italia Cafe, 419 University Ave., (650) 325-7731; VOSHAN Fine Arts Gallery, (650) 321-8108, [ww.voshan.com](http://ww.voshan.com). Also participating is Friday Night Music, a Palo Alto-based ad hoc group of amateur and professional musicians who perform at several of the locales.

*When:* The next First Friday Art Walk will be March 5 from 6 to 9 p.m.

*Cost:* Admission is free.

*Info:* Please visit [www.pacificartleague.org/firstfridays/home.html](http://www.pacificartleague.org/firstfridays/home.html).

*The next event will feature the auction of a signature work by artist Gary Coleman at the Cardinal Hotel, the current sponsor for the event (a different sponsor takes over every three months). Coleman will donate half of the proceeds to benefit the First Friday Art Walk.*

*MARCH 5 AGENDA: Art21 will feature improv, music and performing arts; Bryant Street Gallery will showcase the works of painter Marti Somer; the Pacific Art League will examine the transforming qualities of light and dark in its March show, entitled "Shadow and Light;" Torrefazione Italia Café will feature works by Michal Venera; VOSHAN Fine Arts gallery will showcase works by Maralyn Miller.*

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