

M. STARK GALLERY

Marianna Stark, Principal
727 Main Street | Half Moon Bay, CA 94019
mstarkgallery.com | 415-407-8743 | mstarkgallery@gmail.com

Needle-Felted Landscapes by Birgitta Bower Are Coastside Gold, by Peter Tokofsky PhD

(Coastsider Peter Tokofsky received his Ph.D. in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania. He has held leadership positions at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Craft and Folk Art Museum.)

Birgitta Bower first attempted to capture the raw beauty of the San Mateo County Coast in works of art while participating in a plein-air painting group. She tried to mix the right watercolor hues to describe on paper what she saw while standing on the coastal bluffs, but quickly recognized that her ability to mix colors while outdoors using a traditional artistic medium would never match her vision of the scenes. In order to create art that would convey what she could see, she needed to teach herself new pictorial techniques.

There is a tendency to label artists who teach themselves, especially those who work with media and materials outside of accepted fine art conventions, as “outsiders.” The label implies that the artist is inferior, or peripheral, to those who are more accomplished in conventional artistic formats.

Alternatively, we can understand self-taught and outsider artists as those who – like van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Thornton Dial, Henri Rousseau, and many others – push the boundaries of convention in their search for new forms of expression that capture their vision.

All artists struggle with the process – call it creativity - of transforming inner perceptions into external objects rendered on canvas, paper, or in sculpture. Some become masters of centuries-old techniques in this pursuit. Others teach themselves new methods for generating results.

Self-taught artists and their unexpected techniques help expand our understanding of art, opening new possibilities for viewers and for fellow artists. In this sense, Birgitta Bower’s needle-felting approach to depicting beach and mountain scenes breathes new vibrancy into depictions of the coast and surrounding areas.

So many visitors have snapped pictures of the pastoral scene in “Coastside Gold” that it is at risk of becoming a repetitive “Instagram moment,” but Bower gives it new life by using

threads to add texture to the mustard flowers and aging wood siding. The fuzzy white wool blending with the blue sky reminds viewers of the coast's ever-present fog, and the sinewy phone wires become an evocative feature rather than an intrusion of modernity.

Yarn began tugging at Bower more than a decade ago. Around the same time that a friend from her native Sweden gave her a needle-felting kit, Bower saw some intriguing figures in a children's museum that were created with felting techniques.

She embarked on a journey of exploring the potential of the medium, taking it far beyond DIY kits available in craft stores. She transforms a technique that the art industry wants to limit to hobbyists and crafters, pushing it to its outer limits as an evocative medium.

Bower sources, prepares, and dyes the wool she uses herself to provide a palette of colors and textures that she could not create with watercolor.

A flock of sheep in Sonoma County, raised not for their wool, but to keep a vineyard free of grasses, provides the main source of fibers. Bower combs through the bushels of rough wool shaved from the flock and picks out twigs and other elements that find their way onto the backs of the working animals.

Over time, Bower has become a self-taught expert on the different material aspects of various types of wool – from sheep and goats, to lamas, alpacas, and angora rabbits – enabling her to deploy their unique qualities in her pictures.

After cleaning and preparing the raw wool, Bower creates an expansive palette using the 48 colors of acid dyes produced by the Sonoma County-based Jacquard Products. By controlling the preparation of the powdered dyes, Bower generates a range of color choices that rivals the possibilities of paints and watercolors.

In “Fort Funston 1,” multiple shades of green pile atop one another to evoke the shoreline foliage.

Swirls of blue and green splash against the steep cliffs of “Devil’s Slide” distracting drivers on the winding road above.

Different felting techniques add yet another dimension to the pictures. Wet felting creates what Bower describes as a “blurry, dreamy effect,” while needle or dry felting produces sharper images. The distant sky and hills in “Surfer’s Beach” contrast with the sunlit riprap boulders along the jetty and the sharp colors of the surfboards. The spectrum of grays in the sky, land, and water behind the “Pines of El Granada” allow the viewer to dream of sitting with a warm blanket and hot drink looking out at the moored boats.

Beyond the variety of yarns and colors, Bower expands the expressive power of her images by introducing other, unconventional materials. Laces, threads, prepared yarns, and beads add depth and texture. “I buy weird stuff at the yarn store,” she says.

Twisting white and orange threads become thick ropes tied to the buoys of crab traps in the foreground of “Crab Season.” Simple single stitches dot the harbor water around the fishing boats preparing to set the traps, and, in “Mt. Tam,” similar elements suggest the dry grass.

In other works, Bower employs a bricolage technique that is common among self-taught artists searching for ways to communicate what they see. In addition to the laces and threads, beads, shells, and other found objects accentuate the yarn pictures. For example, beads highlight the foamy waves on “Martin’s Beach” and colorful starfish of “Tide Pool.”

In “Tide Pool,” the role of the artist standing on the boundary between seeing and creating comes full circle. Fragments of seashells sewn into the scene seem almost less real than Bower’s most sculptural elements – crabs, urchins, anemones, sand dollars, and a frame-breaking octopus that might all owe their form to those wool figures spotted in the children’s museum –fill the eye with visions of life on the coast.