

FUTURE OF THE VETERANS CEMETERY • IRVINE'S FOOD • FARM LAB • LOCAL WILDFIRE MONITORING UNIT

IRVINE

WEEKLY

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PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

OC FIRE WATCH

ORANGE COUNTY'S VOLUNTEER-DRIVEN WILDFIRE MONITORING UNIT.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

With studies indicating that Southern California's wildfire season is expanding, experts are already warning that there will be no shortage of wildfire risks in the coming months. And in order to help protect property, wildlife and the natural wilderness, the Orange County Fire Authority has established the OC Fire Watch and is constantly working to educate the public on ways to continually protect the community from wildfire.

The OC Fire Watch program is a volunteer-driven effort, led by the city of Irvine, the Irvine-based Orange County Fire Authority, OC Parks and the Irvine Ranch Conservancy, along with the city of Newport Beach, that provides hands-on training and education to community volunteers, teaching them how to spot, respond and report wildfires to the proper authorities.

Tony Pointer, Irvine Ranch Conservancy's Fire Watch Manager, explained that the OC Fire Watch program will deploy trained volunteers when the National Weather Service issues a Red Flag Warning and determines that an offshore wind event has pushed fire danger into the extreme category.

"Because we're always in a year-round fire season, we have fires in Orange County,

weekly. We're always going to have fires in a fire-prone area, during drought time, living in the wild land urban interface," Pointer explained. "We focus on the times where the ignition potential is in the extreme and makes the fire behavior exceptionally dangerous."

Pointer added that IRC's volunteer wildfire monitoring unit is not specific to Irvine, but a collaboration within a network of other Fire Watch teams, which include the cities of Anaheim and Fullerton, as well as in Los Angeles County and across greater portions of the state.

"It's the next generation of the 'Look Out' towers. What they wanted with Fire Watches is to be able to interact with the public, let them know why it's important to be vigilant," Pointer explained. "Since we're surrounded by residential areas in the wild land urban interface, it's not like we could put up a tower anywhere and have good visibility."

However, considering the new health regulations caused by the pandemic, the OC Fire Watch program has needed to adapt to the current circumstances, giving volunteers a chance to contribute their time from the safety of their homes.

"We were staffing throughout the whole COVID-19 pandemic. On every red flag warning, it depended upon what we did

for training, so we did a lot of virtual activities and part of those virtual activities were incorporating more hybrid models, where there were folks at home on YouTube, or wherever they were," he said.

Thanks to technology, he has been able to livestream Fire Watch training sessions in order for volunteers to stay informed. Pointer added that the annual Fire Watch Symposium was held virtually this year, which was something new.

"In these COVID times, the Fire Watch Symposium had a slightly different format than the previous years and our normal activities," Pointer said. "This year, the symposium was presented virtually on IRC's YouTube channel and Facebook page, making it easy for the public to attend the symposium from the comfort of their own home."

In addition to virtual training exercises, Pointer also encourages both volunteers and the public to keep tabs on wildfire prone areas by monitoring dozens of ALERT-Wildfire cameras in real-time online.

On Saturday, June 5, Pointer led a group of a half-dozen volunteers on a Fire Watch training exercise, which spanned nearly 50 miles between Carbon Canyon Regional Park in Brea, to Ronald W. Caspers Wilderness Park near Mission Viejo.

"When we look at where ignitions come from, a good portion of ignitions in Orange County come from our roadways and they also primarily start along those toll roads areas – where roads drive through the wild land urban interface," Pointer explained. "And right now, that 241 corridor is one of our most ignition-prone in Orange County."

Sporting bright yellow Fire Watch vests, and driving in vehicles with large Fire Watch car door magnets, OC Fire Watch volunteers are not hard to miss. Pointer explained that is part of the concept of the Fire Watch program, to act as a deterrent to man-made fires.

"One of the cornerstones of what we do

relates to visual deterrents. So one of the reasons that the volunteers have the magnets and wear bright vests is to put individuals on notice that there is somebody out there that can be an early reporter," he explained. "So, if we see something suspicious, we call 9-1-1, just like any other average citizen would."

Now, with peak wildfire season approaching in Southern California, Pointer, who has been with the IRC since 2016, says OC Fire Watch is gearing up for a busy season. Pointer reflected on the recent wildfires near Irvine – the Silverado Fire, and most recently the Bond Fire of 2020 – emphasizing that the area is under constant threat of wildfire.

Last year, Pointer said even with Fire Watch monitoring the areas near the 241 for nearly 12 hours daily, both blazes ignited during a shift change between OC Fire Watch and the Canyon Area Fire Watch.

"The challenge in Orange County, particularly that corridor of the 241 in Santiago Canyon, is we just had a fire in 2017, then we had the Canyon Fire right after, which burned other segments of Irvine Ranch open space. Both ignitions [Santiago/Bond] occurred before our Fire Watch segments started," he said. "We typically staff from 9:00 am - 5:00 p.m. at 36 locations throughout the county, when we're not on Canyon Watch staffs overnight – so it was when Canyon Watch was on, but we were just getting our rosters together."

However, since OC Fire Watch does not carry firefighting equipment, Pointer added that it was his responsibility to clear his volunteers out from the fire area, once fire crews are on scene.

Currently, OC Fire Watch has approximately 300 volunteers, but has not been able to add to the existing roster due to the pandemic.

For more information on how to become a OC Fire Watch volunteer please visit Letsgooutside.org.



PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

PIONEERING THE FUTURE OF URBAN FARMING

USING A SOIL-FIRST MICRO-FARMING, IRVINE'S FARM + FOOD LAB IS EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SOIL HEALTH.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Sitting on just under two acres of land within the Orange County Great Park, the Farm + Food Lab is a non-profit farm which is operated by city of Irvine and the Solutions for Urban Agriculture. The Farm + Food Lab is a zero-waste, carbon-free micro-farm, pioneering innovative urban farming practices in Orange County.

In addition to growing crops for the Second Harvest Food Bank, the Farm + Food Lab provides hands-on micro-farming education for the public and uses a concept known as regenerative organic farming to produce all different types of agriculture.

The Farm + Food Lab complex is divided into two sides, the Alegria Farms component, which maintains a half-acre of space next to the full-acre Farm + Food Lab component.

Erick Cutter, a board member for Solutions for Urban Agriculture, and the Managing Director of Alegria Fresh [Alegria Farms] said he joined the Farm + Food Lab in 2019 specifically to help develop new tech-

niques for urban agriculture.

For Cutter, the most important aspect of the Farm + Food Lab is the ability to produce the freshest food possible, something that he referred to as, "ultra-fresh food."

Cutter spends his days watering, harvesting and helping maintain the grounds upon which dozens of high-quality fruits and vegetables are grown all year round.

Cutter's work in the urban agriculture space has led to the creation of an innovative grow box, known as the SoxxBoxx, which has been incorporated as the primary growing technique at the Irvine-based Farm+ Food Lab. At its core, the SoxxBoxx is a rectangular-shaped cloth-like pot, which is filled with soil and incorporates hydroponic growing techniques. Specifically, Cutter's design allows for more oxygen to flow through the soil, allowing roots to process nutrients faster.

But for Cutter, growing location is key.

"I can grow the finest, highest-quality food over cement – which is the only way we're going to grow food in the cities," Cutter ex-

plained. "People are starting to understand how important it is to eat fresh food."

During an on-site interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Cutter gave an informal taste-test tour of rare varieties of vegetables found within his garden at the Farm + Food Lab.

From tasty herbs like purple Reuben and Cardinal basil, to purple mustard and Romaine lettuce, Cutter estimated that there are nearly 80,000 different plants being cared for daily.

"Everything here is regenerative organic, which means it's above organic. Regenerative is basically soil-first," Cutter explained. "Soil first is mimicking nature – we've forgotten about how important soil is to us."

With this concept, Cutter added there are three core principles within regenerative organic agriculture.

"The idea was to bring back the concept of regenerative organic – which there is none of that going on in this county – one is soil first. Everything is about the soil," he said while watering beds of leafy greens on a warm morning in May. "We feed soil,

we don't feed plants. Also, it's about farmers' rights, equitable food justice for farmers and animal welfare. [Those] are the three main tenets of regenerative organic agriculture."

With these techniques and a unique climate in Irvine, Cutter says the Farm + Food Lab is able to produce both domestic and exotic varieties of fruits and vegetables all year long, without any issues.

"This is probably one of the most important one-and-a-half acres you can imagine, especially around all this development," Cutter said. "This little farm represents zero-waste, regenerative organic, carbon negative, because we're pulling down so much carbon in here, and putting it into the soil."

While the primary focus of the Farm + Food Lab is producing agriculture for the Second Harvest Food Bank in Irvine, Cutter explained that the produce grown there cannot be sold to the public.

However, he hopes to soon pioneer a new farmers market concept where shoppers would point and pick their own fruits and vegetables, directly from the ground or vine.

Nathan Gipple, Senior Director of Solutions for Urban Agriculture, is part of Cutter's eight-man team that is working to ensure the Farm + Food Lab continues to thrive.

Despite the success, Cutter admits his biggest fear is losing the Farm + Food Lab to construction. Cutter added that the city of Irvine has introduced plans that would place a USA Water Polo Facility on the land that the Farm + Food Lab currently occupies.

Irvine City Manager Marianna Marysheva did not deny the existence of such plans, adding that the city is not aware of any updates regarding the timeline of the project.

Yet, regardless of any official plans, Gipple said that is just the reality of the situation in Irvine – and beyond.

"It's just the reality of farming in Orange County. That's been the case since land becomes more valuable than houses and farmland," he said. "It's becoming more and more difficult to do for-profit farming. Most of the farms that are still around are non-profit or Agro-tourism, and that's just the nature of the industry."

Gipple said he is striving to make sure the community can have a place to learn, volunteer and understand why these aspects are so important to community health.

"It's full circle learning, it's not just seed to mature plant to harvest, back to seed," he said. "We are optimistic that places like this can serve as a regeneration of farming at a smaller scale, food gardening for everyone in the community."

LOCAL VETS SAY “POLITICAL CROSSFIRE” HAS NIXED VETERANS CEMETERY IN IRVINE

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



ARDA and Golf Course Sites
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CITY OF IRVINE

After years of discussion surrounding the undetermined location of a veterans cemetery project in Irvine, the project itself, which has yet to break ground, is now facing pushback from Orange County-based veterans groups who say they are caught in a political crossfire between the differing opinions of the public and members Irvine’s City Council.

In an interview with Irvine Weekly, Nick Berardino, a Vietnam veteran and president of Veterans Alliance of Orange County (VALOR), said due to the ongoing division of interests among the Golf Course and ARDA sites, local veterans groups are now urging the Orange County Board of Supervisors to adopt a regional approach, and are asking Irvine to decline the opportunity to build a veterans cemetery within the city.

Now, Berardino says that local veterans groups have been exploring the possibility of building the veterans cemetery on county-owned land just east of Anaheim

Hills, near the 241 Toll Road in Gypsum Canyon.

“We’ve determined we’re caught in the middle of two groups who are committed and prepared to protect their interests,” Berardino explained. “We’re caught in a crossfire and we’ve decided from our military experience, when you’re caught in a crossfire, and your tanks are fogged down – you’re gonna get killed.”

In a press release, VALOR introduced a new direction in support for a veterans cemetery site near Anaheim Hills. Berardino added that local veterans groups he is involved with have been working to secure the 280-acre site near the 241 Toll Road – which now has the support of Third District Supervisors Don Wagner.

“This just seems like the right thing to do for our veterans,” Wagner said in the VALOR press release. “They sacrificed everything to protect our nation. We should be able to come together, figure this out, and build a regional cemetery in Orange County to honor their service.”

Despite the recent publication of the dual-site study released by the California Department of Veterans Affairs, which was conducted in order to determine the most cost-effective site for the veterans cemetery in Irvine, Berardino said it is clear that the cemetery project is in for a long-winded legal battle.

Specifically, Berardino theorizes that if the city of Irvine chooses the Golf Course Site, Irvine City Council Member Larry Agran, who is the council’s most outspoken supporter for building a veterans cemetery on the ARDA site, will file a lawsuit against the decision, further impacting the timeline of this project.

Agran himself has alluded to such actions. In a recent interview with Irvine Weekly, Agran described a “powerful legal response” in regards to ensuring the veterans cemetery is built on the ARDA site.

“I think the political response would be very powerful and very much opposed to trying to undo the will of the people. As a legal matter, there probably would be

avenues pursued by the Build The Great Park Veterans Cemetery committee and others,” Agran said.

However, Berardino said local veterans are already working with the county Board of Supervisors in selecting a new site outside of Irvine.

“Irvine is not a suitable location. So, we have chosen a new direction. We’ve met with Don Wagner from the Board of Supervisors and talked to county staff, and two things have become clear to us,” he explained. “One is, Irvine is trying to put a square peg in a round hole, but two, this is a heavy lift and we need to have broad regional support. We need the kind of regional support that working with the Board of Supervisors will bring.”

Berardino, a Vietnam combat veteran, said he is ready to continue fighting for veterans in Orange County, adding that this new direction gives them hope. “We are not fearful, but we are hopeful that the politicians and others that have been participating in this political chess game will

also see the important thing is not their egos, or their personal preferences – but veterans interests.”

Along with VALOR, the Orange County Veterans Memorial Park Foundation also has a heavy interest in the new Anaheim Hills location. Bill Cook, Chairman of the OCVMPF said he is responsible for the original selection of the ARDA site, but emphasized it was time for Irvine to decline the project.

“We went out and looked at the site, which is in Gypsum Canyon. The site is county park land, it was donated to the county by the Irvine Company,” Cook explained. “I have been favoring this for the better part of a year. I’ve completely turned away from Irvine. I’ve been sending emails to Irvine saying, “The way out of your dilemma is just say no – just decline the veterans cemetery – we’re no longer interested and we don’t think it fits our community.”

Vietnam veteran and current Irvine resident Robert “Bob” Brower, who was awarded two Bronze Stars and two Purple Heart medals during his time as an Army Sergeant and member of the 506th regiment of the 101st airborne division, said he has built professional relationships at the federal level that have given him unique insight to the veterans cemetery discussions.

Thanks to Brower’s work on the National Legislative Council on behalf of the American Legion, he remains confident that regardless of Argan’s expected legal response in the selection of the Golf Course site, the bottom line is that the National Cemetery Administration will have the final say on location, design and funding of a veterans cemetery – not just in Irvine, but nationwide.

“I was in Washington, and I met with the director of the State and Tribal Cemetery program and have talked subsequently with the associate director, who is responsible for California – before the state can start working on this, they have to submit and have approved by the National Cemetery Administration, working drawings for a particular site that would be eligible to receive a federal grant, which would be in phases, maximum \$10 million per-phase of construction, into probably tens of years,” Brower explained. “Under that particular program, there’s language in there the city can’t build these types of cemeteries, it has to be built by the state – that’s why it’s called State and Tribal Cemeteries Program.”

Regardless of what site is chosen, Brower estimates that if he and his comrades – Bernardino, Cook and many others – can convince the Board of Supervisors to support the Anaheim Hills site, it will be at least three years before the project will break ground. Brower admits he thinks that will be the quickest route to giving Orange County veterans a proper resting place.

“If SB-43 (Veterans Cemetery: County of Orange) becomes law, and stays law in this session of the Legislature, you would have to come back and do new legislation in the next year to change that – so that’s a year delay. Then have CalVet do another study, that would take probably another year,” he said during a phone call with Irvine Weekly. “Probably a year and a half out for it to go to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as a pre-application to have them evaluate that. Depending upon how much funding is put together at the state – you’re pushing this down the road probably two or three years.”

Proposed “Golf Course Site” for Irvine Veterans Cemetery in the foreground, with the ARDA site in the distance. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CITY OF IRVINE



IRVINE ATTRACTIONS REOPEN AFTER A YEAR OF CLOSURES

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

After more than a year of closures around Orange County and beyond, June 15 marked the reopening of well-known attractions around Irvine, including several aspects of the Irvine Spectrum. The Irvine Spectrum has been highlighting soon-to-be reopened attractions, like the Giant Wheel and Carousel on social media, with a recent post on June 5 announcing an official reopening date.

In addition to the Spectrum’s Giant Wheel, the popular Carousel also reopened for business on June 15. The Spectrum’s carousel has also been updated since it was open last March. Ticket and availability information will be posted here: www.irvinespectrumcenter.com.

Another aspect of the Irvine Spectrum reopening to the public is the Spectrum Climber, a dimensional interactive sculpture. Standing more than 15 feet tall, the Spectrum Climber is a fun, safe physical activity that encourages problem-solving and spatial thinking.

Also open now is the Hello Kitty Cafe, which features dine-in seating, along with a full bar. Comedy shows are also back at the Irvine Improv. Check out the list of June performances on the Irvine Improv’s website, which include Comedian Dane Cook and Gabriel “Fluffy” Iglesias.

Other group activities, like the Irvine Spectrum’s well-known The Escape Game,

a challenging, interactive game in which groups need to “Escape” themed scenarios, has also reopened. Both in-person and virtual escape games are now available for booking.

Aside from the Irvine Spectrum, there are many other activities opening back up around Irvine, including the return of Movies on the Lawn at the Orange County Great Park. This summer, Movies on the Lawn will begin on Saturday, June 26 to August 21.

In a Facebook post on Wednesday, June 9, the Orange County Great Park posted more information regarding Movies on the Lawn, which would begin at the end of June:

“We can’t wait to bring the community back together for the return of Movies on the Lawn at the Orange County Great Park this summer. Join us various Saturday evenings, June 26-August 21, for a series of family-friendly movies screening outdoors. Bring a blanket or low-back chair, and enjoy one of our favorite summer activities from individual socially distanced picnic circles with your family and friends. Movies begin after sunset. Admission is free but advance registration is required. See a full schedule and get your tickets at yourirvine.org.”

As Irvine gets ready for summer, reopening these Irvine-based activities should provide more fun-filled experiences for all ages, for the rest of year.

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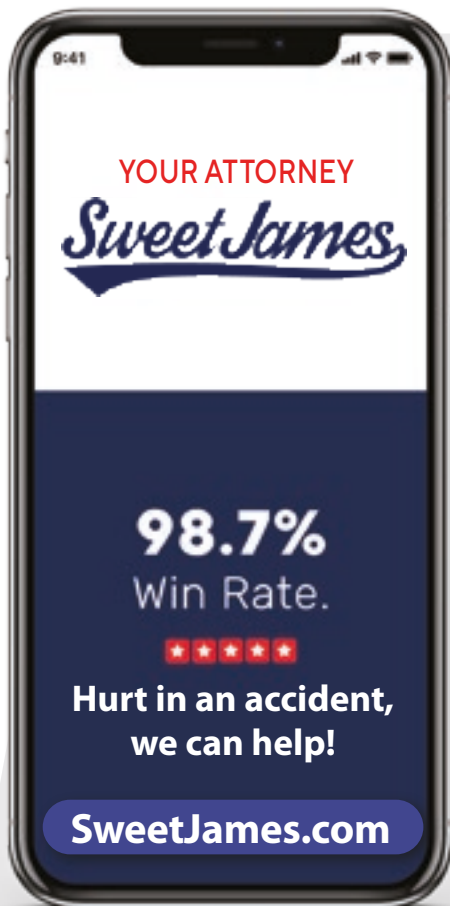
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CONTEXTUALIZING THE ABSTRACT ART GENRE

A NEW EXHIBITION AT THE ORANGE COUNTY CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART EXPLORES THE WORKS OF SOHEILA SIADATE AND JOSHUA ELIAS.

BY LIZ GOLDNER



PHOTO BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

Fragmentation and Harmony explores the grandeur, refinement and even dystopian aspects of abstract artwork, while the exhibition title refers to diverging approaches to creating art of this genre by two participating artists.

Soheila Siadate exhibits paintings on canvas and fabric and two assemblage pieces, all reflecting the fear, dismay and recent sense of relief that she has felt since the start of the pandemic. Joshua Elias' abstract paintings, balancing shapes, color, lines and mood, illustrate the creative journey that he has been on for the past three decades.

The 40 works by the two artists – while differing from each other's in their creative origins, methods and mediums – dialogue seamlessly on the walls of the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art. Their pieces, reflecting the panoply of emotions that most of us have felt over the past 15 months, also display passion, bold application of paint and scintillating energy.

Curator Shana Nys Dambrot elucidates, "I see two painters with very different styles yet each performing a deep dive into the nature of matter, form, energy and percep-

tion... Each has a personal, specific story to tell, and yet each has determined to do so in a gestural, rarefied language of energy and impression that arises from places and events like fog from a morning lake, catching the light."

Siadate's boldest piece in this show, "Devour," is a 48-inch diameter black assemblage sculpture made of metal mesh that she shaped into a semi-circular form, then ripped and tore to reveal jagged edges. The sculpture, evoking the images we have seen of the COVID-19 virus, is a lucid depiction of the dark aspects of the pandemic that the artist has experienced in her own life and with her friends.

Several other Siadate pieces in this exhibition contain circles and balls. She explains, "During this time of Covid, I noticed that I have been running around in circles. I became aware that the whole world is a circle and how we are all globally affected by this microscopic circle" [the progression of the virus]. She was so fearful about life during the pandemic that she retreated to a small loft in her home where she felt safe. She worked intensely there on her latest series of paintings, often incorporating circles into the works.

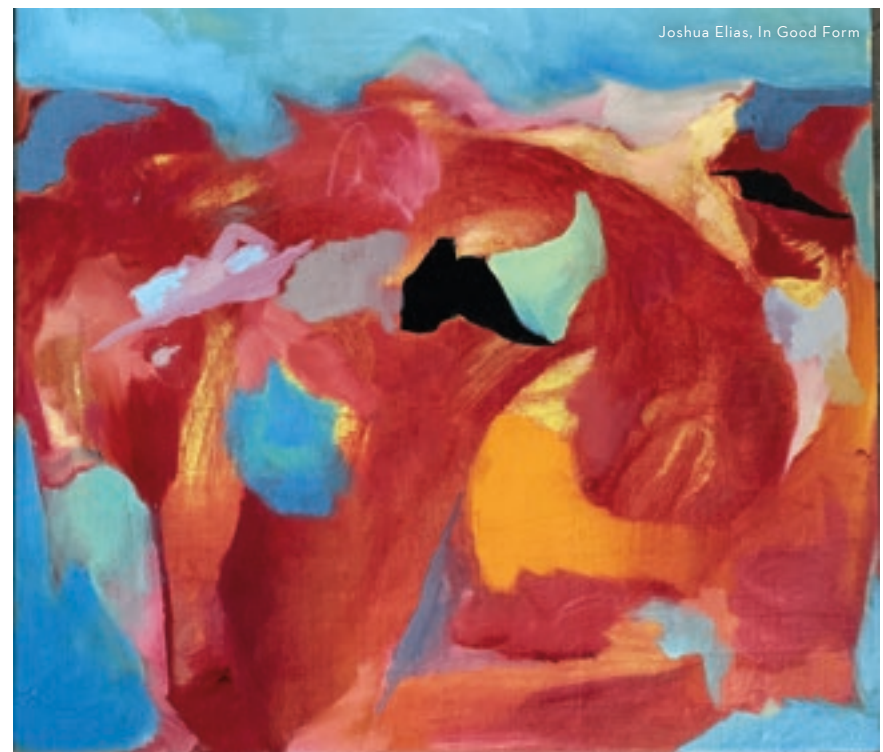
Her "Genomics of Galaxy I" and "Mah-E Roshan," each containing several dozen circles of various sizes, progressing in a

course, portend the evolution of positive change in our world. With their abstract blue and green backgrounds, the paintings are recolored of our universe in flux. Her contrasting "Shredded Emotions," created with mixed media including toilet paper, is a vertically striated illustration of her temporary loss of good memories. "Desaturated," even darker in mood and coloration with organic shapes on a black background, suggests the despair of the pandemic. Yet the harmony of the painting, in structure and coloration, extols the beauty extant in our world even during the gloomiest times.

Siadate's most recently completed contribution to this show is "Peacefully Submerged," an elegant installation in the gallery's dimly lit back room. Composed of 350 shimmering fiber optic cables surrounding painted Styrofoam balls, with water dripping throughout the piece, it intimates the advent of peace and harmony in our constantly evolving world.

Contrasting in tone and intention, yet complementing Siadate's pieces and bringing this exhibition from despair to exultation, are the paintings of Joshua Elias. He describes his colorful oils as "Spiritual Abstraction" and indeed they are. Inspired by the many decades of abstract painting, the artist forges his own path, combining large swirls and swaths of primary and muted colors to create a range of emotions, with an emphasis on joy. He encourages viewers to gaze at his paintings for long periods, to meditate on them and on their numinous features.

In several pieces, Elias emphasizes one particular color in various hues. "Sortie" is



Joshua Elias, In Good Form

ARTS



Soheila Siadate, "Mah-E Roshan"

a study in yellows, from bright to dirty, as he describes it, with splotches of greens, oranges, blues and browns. The total effect mimics a field of spring flowers seen from afar.

The complementary "Elpis" has a background composed of blues, from sky-colored to deeper shades, to hues approaching navy. Also including large splotches of yellows, greens and browns, the artist has created a transcendent painting that uplifts the viewer. "In Good Form," with broad painterly areas of bright to deep reds and large clumps of contrasting colors, demonstrates Elias' ability to use color to inspire.

In other paintings, he combines several shades to create abstract pieces that explode with color, form and fluidity. "Exceptional Rules" contains a harmonious blending of blues, greens, yellows and

a bit of pink and browns. "The Weavers" features primary colors, seemingly woven alongside each other. And "Winston Revisited" with reds, yellows, oranges, greens and browns set against a blue background evokes the sky on a perfect California day.

This skillfully curated exhibition reveals how Siadate and Elias – influenced by decades of this movement's evolution – use their creative instincts to enable this style to flow intuitively from within. The show also demonstrates that abstraction is an ongoing and important influence today among Southern California artists and art lovers.

"Fragmentation and Harmony" is on view through June 26, 2021. Orange County Center for Contemporary Art 117 North Sycamore Street, Santa Ana. Gallery open for appointment only: (714) 667 1517; info.occca@gmail.com; <https://www.occca.org/>



Soheila Siadate, Shredded Emotions

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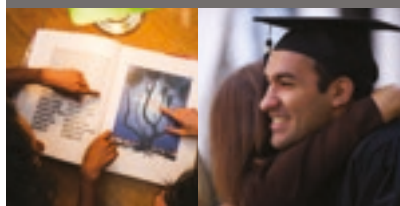
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IRVINE STUDENTS SPEAK OUT AGAINST HATE WITH 16 FOOT ANTI-RACISM MURAL

THE STUDENT-DESIGNED, FULL-COLOR MURAL IS PART OF PORTOLA HIGH SCHOOL'S "PAINT FOR NO HATE" ART CONTEST.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Irvine high school students put their art activism on display during a student-driven, "Paint For No Hate" art contest, created to show support for the Stop AAPI Hate and the Black Lives Matter movement in Irvine.

In an interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Haruka Noda, 17, a soon-to-be senior at Portola High School, said she created the contest with the help of Portola High School visual arts instructor Kearci Moir.

"I really want this to be a project that the youth can connect to and for high schoolers who are passionate about what's happening around us and in our society," Noda said. "I think art is a really great way to direct your energy."

For Noda, her passion for art history led her to discover both classical and Renaissance artists, but her interests transitioned into art activism after recent protests around the world – and locally in Irvine. Last summer,

Noda said she was inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests and became concerned with the recent rise of hate crimes against Asians.

"[I wanted] something that was a response to those hate crimes, that the public can see – and I thought art is such a great way to do that. It's a very peaceful form of expression," she said. "I've been taking art courses at Portola [High School] since my freshman year, but I am focused on art activism and art history, rather than being an artist myself."

Through Noda's call to action, high school students from Irvine submitted their designs. Noda explained that while a number of designs were submitted, the piece submitted by Zilin Jin, a high school student in Irvine, was selected for a variety of reasons, including its clear message for social justice.

"We were having trouble choosing between two designs, but we went with Zilin's design because we

loved the horizontal composition and the dynamic coloring," Noda explained. "Also, it's breathtaking – a mural has to be really eye-catching, and it's also better if the mural is a landscape format so everything checked the boxes."

While only one was selected, Noda still found a way for Irvine students to contribute their artistic talents. By splitting the mural into grids, and incorporating a "paint by numbers" concept to Jin's design, Noda explained that high school students from Irvine were able to work in shifts to help complete the massive 16-foot mural.

"Once it's done, it'll be displayed at the Great Park Palm Courts at the Irvine Summer Art Market on June 20," Noda explained. "After that event, that mural will rotate around all of the IUSD schools during the school year."

On Saturday, June 11, Irvine high schoolers signed up to work in shifts to help create Jin's design.

"We painted from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., basically in groups, so we could stay socially distanced," Noda said. "We split the mural into squares, then drew with pencil the design of the mural, with the help of the designer," Noda explained.

While her passion for art has materialized in multiple ways, Noda is also preparing to become an art history major, currently enrolled in courses at Sotheby's Art Institute. From her perspective, she said she is witnessing more of a willingness from her peers to become outspoken about these causes by using the resources available to them.

"It's unbelievable. I can't believe how fast everything moved. I started this project maybe mid-March, and it's come so far, and I think it will hit me all at once, once I see everyone painting it and seeing it displayed," she said. "From my point of view, the high schoolers in Irvine are super passionate about protests, Black Lives Matter, and everything."

PHOTO BY EVAN J. LANCASTER



PHOTO BY CHRIS LEE



IRVINE MUSICIANS SELECTED TO PLAY IN CARNEGIE HALL YOUTH ENSEMBLES

**AS A PART OF CARNEGIE HALL'S
NATIONAL YOUTH ORCHESTRA,
FOUR IRVINE MUSICIANS WILL
BE HEADING TO NEW YORK
FOR A THREE-WEEK COURSE AT
PURCHASE COLLEGE SUNY.**

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Considering how impacted life has become under the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, for high school musicians in Irvine, the phrase, "what a difference a year can make," rings truer in the current circumstances.

Now, instead of spending another summer practicing via Zoom, four Irvine-based high school musicians will be playing in person, in New York, as a part of the Youth Ensemble Program at Carnegie Hall – for the first time since the pandemic began.

While the pandemic created many hardships for all walks of life, COVID-19 presented an especially challenging time for high school musicians. For some musicians in Irvine, the pandemic placed a hold on

many music-forward activities, forcing many young musicians into playing alone via Zoom, or not at all.

Now, thanks to an opportunity presented by the New York-based Carnegie Hall, a few local high school musicians will be able to get some much-needed socialization – training and expanding their musical curriculum and playing with other talented peers while attending Carnegie Hall's Youth Ensembles.

As part of the National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America, which is one of three youth orchestras at the historic Carnegie Hall, the Irvine musicians will embark on their East Coast journey on July 6.

Clive Gillinson, Carnegie Hall's Executive and Artistic Director said the trio of NYO

ensembles is a great way to showcase the musical talents of young musicians across the country.

"We are thrilled to be bringing the musicians of NYO-USA, NYO2 and NYO Jazz together for an extraordinary month of music-making," Gillinson said. "These three ensembles shine a spotlight on the great depth of musical talent found all across the country. The musicians are superb players who are passionate about music and dedicated to connecting and growing alongside their peers. We are also fortunate to have a stellar faculty who will mentor these superb young musicians and help them to grow artistically and personally. It will be an especially exciting time, as teens from across the country finally get to play together in-person again."

While Carnegie Hall will remain closed due to the pandemic, the program will continue with health and safety guidelines at Purchase College at SUNY.

Irene Lee, a cellist, and an incoming senior at Northwood High School, has been playing the cello for more than a decade. Lee said that prior to the pandemic, her music would consist of chamber groups.

In an interview with *Irvine Weekly*, Lee added that the pandemic made it difficult for her to practice due to anxiety, but is looking forward to the experience of traveling and being with her friends.

"After being separated from my fellow musicians for so long because of the pandemic, just thinking about being on stage with them makes me super hyped," she said. "I think a lot of music has to do with collaborations, I like to share with others, but since I've been cut off from that for a year, it's been pretty difficult"

Next year, Lee says she hopes to maintain an East Coast residency while attending Juilliard School of the Arts.

Sein Yun, a violinist, attending her last

year of school at the Orange County School of the Arts in Santa Ana, said this will be her second opportunity to play with the National Youth Orchestra. Last year, she attended NYO virtually.

For Yun, the experience of playing in an orchestra has not happened since March of 2020.

"School has been happening online for me this entire school year, and youth orchestra also has been paused – I couldn't participate in any orchestral activities for the past several months," Yun explained during a phone interview with *Irvine Weekly*. "So, this will be the first time in a year and a half that I finally get to perform with others."

Yun added that while the last year has undoubtedly shaped her perspective, she remains optimistic about the future.

"It tested us to our core – but despite all these drastic changes I think, as musicians, we all continued to play and enjoy music, even if that meant performing through video, or online lessons"

As a part of NYO's selection process, musicians were asked to submit a few different essays sharing their perspectives on music. For Irvine violinist Rachel Kim, who will be a senior at University High School next year, this part of the audition process meant tapping into her admiration for the Irvine community.

"Explained how my community impacted me and allowed me to have access to these programs," she explained.

Jaden Kim, a violinist who also attends the Orange County School of the Arts said that he is directly inspired by the musicians around him.

"I look forward to the learning experience in the NYO program because the fellow musicians are extremely talented and hard-working, which personally brings a lot of inspiration for my own growth," he said. "It is a wonderful opportunity to learn new musical ideas and gain inspiration from others"

PHOTO BY CHRIS LEE





STAR WARS: THE BAD BATCH (DISNEY+)

UNBINGED: STREAMING REVIEWS

DO LOKI, SWEET TOOTH AND THE BAD BATCH LIVE UP TO THE FANDOM AND FANTASY?

BY ERIN MAXWELL

There's a battle brewing, and it's being fought by streaming services, cable TV and Primetime television. If you're too weak to resist, UnBinged is here to help, telling you what to hate, what to love and what to love to hate.

In lieu of a Comic-Con this year, fans of sci-fi sagas, fantastic fables, Marvel Comics, and universes far, far away only have to turn to their televisions to get their fix. This month, UnBinged takes a look at the latest branch of the *Star Wars* universe, a modern-day fantasy from Netflix, and a new series from the MCU.

Star Wars: The Bad Batch (Disney+)

Disney+'s *Star Wars: The Bad Batch* is the latest chapter in the ever-expanding *Star Wars* universe, as executive producers

and series creators Dave Filoni and Jennifer Corbett prove once again that the best way for the Mouse House to grow their *Star Wars* interests is via the small screen.

Born from the final season of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, the series follows the exploits of Clone Force 99, a rag-tag group of "defective" clone troopers also known as "The Bad Batch." The space saga follows squad members Hunter, Wrecker, Tech, Crosshair and Echo (all voiced by Dee Bradley Baker) as they find themselves the unlikely caretakers of a little clone of their very own.

Recent theatrical outings have dulled the luster of the *Star Wars* universe for many due to muddled storytelling. But where the films may have faltered, television shows flourished. Disney has been slowly rebuilding faith in both the *Star*

Wars story and the fan base on TV.

So where does *The Bad Batch* fall in this new world order?

The show follows a formula similar to the megahit *The Mandalorian*, taking an unlikely hero (actually, several of them), giving them parental responsibility, adding a few side missions, and watching hijinks ensue. But unlike *The Mandalorian*, *The Bad Batch* is a bit harder to binge.

The Mandalorian followed a template set by traditional Westerns and Kurosawa films, creating a framework that could stand on its own, even with only a vague understanding of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. And while *Batch* is meticulously made, it would be difficult to comprehend without first binging the prequel trilogy and *The Clone Wars*. One

must almost choke on a steady diet of *Star Wars* in order to grasp the premise.

In the end, *The Bad Batch* is a fun outing for hardcore *Star Wars* fans who want to know every aspect of the universe. But for those who are just looking for another *Mandalorian*, well, these are not the clones you are looking for.

Sweet Tooth (Netflix)

Adapted by Jim Mickle (*We Are What We Are*) and Beth Schwartz (*Arrow*) from the popular DC Comic, and executive produced by Susan and Robert Downey Jr., Netflix's *Sweet Tooth* is a bittersweet tale about a human-animal hybrid boy born to a world on the brink of extinction. But the series is much more than an apocalyptic tale (of which there are many these days). It is a story filled with heart and soul that carries with it an important message.

It's centered on Gus (Christian Convery) – nicknamed Sweet Tooth due to his love of refined sugar – a young deer-boy raised in isolation by "Pubba" (Will Forte) while a deadly virus ravages the globe. As humanity fights to survive, it is discovered that half animal-half human hybrid babies born at this time seem

impervious to the pandemic. They are looked upon with scorn and as populations are divided and form sects, these new children are hunted and experimented on in hopes of finding a cure.

Fans of the comic will notice that the series doesn't follow the source material. Story arcs, character backstories and motivations, as well as many of the darker elements of the tale, have been changed or completely eradicated. But the essence of the story is still intact thanks in no small part to Convery, who bears the weight of the show with as much grace as the antlers on his noggin. His character's innocence and earnestness is mesmerizing as he gently guides viewers through the horrors of his journey.

Furthermore, the beauty of the CGI landscapes, the gentle narration provided by James Brolin, and the warm tones used throughout each episode enhance the fairy tale aspects, creating a family-friendly tale that can still be dark at times, but not soul-destroying or scarring for the kiddos (we're looking at you, *Watership Down*).

It is the right time and place for *Sweet Tooth*. The discarded darker elements of the source material give the saga a softer edge, creating something more palpable for viewers to understand. The end result is an elegant and touching hero's journey with a clear message: *That which should have brought us together tore us apart ... but it doesn't have to. We can do better.*

Loki (Disney+)

"What makes Loki tick?" It's a valid question for fans of the Marvel Universe, and it turns out, the answer makes for a great TV show. Disney+'s *Loki* picks up from when we last saw the character in *Avengers: Endgame*, as his 2012 timeline counterpart picks up the Tesseract after the Battle of New York and moseys away. But this act of defiance did more than just keep the Trickster God (mischievously played by Tom Hiddleston) alive and well in the MCU. It nabbed the attention of the Time Variance Authority, a force so great that Infinity Stones are nothing more than pretty paperweights that tend to clutter their desks. They are a cosmic administration charged with protecting "the Sacred Timeline," the single timetable the entire Multiverse must follow. And to do this, the TVA must keep "Variants" in check, such as our dear Loki.

Left in the hands of TVA Agent Mobius (Owen Wilson), Loki is given a new part to play. Taking a page from the *48 Hour* playbook by using a criminal to catch a criminal, Loki must use his experience as a devious scamp to track other Variants, thus reshaping his role in the MCU.

Once again, Marvel is leaning on a Disney+ show to do the heavy lifting for future film endeavors. *Loki* allows Hiddleston to fully explore the character, who is reset here to his early 2010s bad-boy version, giving him the chance to flex his acting chops in a role he was



LOKI (DISNEY+)

clearly born to play. In addition to Hiddleston's screen savvy, Wilson's gentle ribbing and calm temperament works beautifully against the titular lead's god complex.

In addition to its actor chemistry, *Loki* also excels in world-building, exploring the layers of the TVA in all of its red taped bureaucratic bullshit glory. As

Loki himself states, "No one bad is ever truly bad, and no one good is ever truly good." This is the character in a nutshell. He's as complex as he is entertaining. The jury is out on Thor's adopted brother, but one thing is for sure – the show about him is very, very good. (*New episodes of Loki air Wednesdays on Disney+ until the finale on July 14*).



SWEET TOOTH (NETFLIX)

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