



Pat Sherwood

## Cashing In

### **Breathtaking art seems to hang just fine in the Santa Cruz County Bank, thank you very much**

by Jackie Black

It's a well-known fact that if there is one place we all dread going to, it's the bank. The dull shuffle of feet, old ladies counting pennies, a line of bored, nondescript faces. And, of course, the obligatory screaming kid up at the front of the line. Isn't this why they invented ATMs?

In an unexpected move for most serious businesses, Santa Cruz County Banks have begun featuring art installations in all three of their branches. Spicing up tired office space with modern art, the exhibits engage various genres and styles, covering not only the lobby floor, but out into individual offices as well.

Bank CEO John Rossell is the architect of the project and founder of the Santa Cruz County Banks Collaborative. "Strictly speaking," he says, "we're not a gallery."

Gallery or no, the employees are all trained as virtual docents, encouraging customers and timid viewers to peruse. They also provide price lists and artist information to interested individuals. Looks like the phrase, "Please, step into my office," just got a whole lot better.

The Santa Cruz branch's current show, "Sensibilities," curated by Christine Murray, presents 48 works by five local women. Marie Bourget, Donna Cehrs, Sara Friedlander, Claire Lerner and Patricia Sherwood present a unique mix of styles, ranging from abstract acrylic to photography-based oils.

Stepping into the bank's gallery reception area is a surprisingly refreshing experience. Behind the teller's counter, a row of Friedlander's dark oil paintings (based on digital aerial photographs) is displayed. At the end of the lobby towers a large abstract sculpture, boldly painted in vibrant reds and yellows. The conference room, on the other hand, is much more subdued, decorated with traditional still life oil paintings, by Cehrs.

One art aficionado jokingly set down his price list to offer me help in refinancing my house.

The exhibit continues, unfurling throughout each of the individual offices. One office contains a series of paintings of dice scattered across the wall—a work by Marie Bourget—while the next displays a group of work by Lerner, photographs covered in a waxy substance, then retouched with acrylics. The show is an intersection of unique voices that instill an unforeseen air of intimacy in the characteristically commercial milieu.

“The banks nowadays have become so merchandizing driven,” Rossell explains, “Usually when you go into a bank you’re beset by posters and advertising.”

Spacious, strategically lit, and bedecked with an assortment of modern art, this bank is a far cry from the marketing ploys most people are accustomed to. Waiting in line, there are no ominous signs looming overhead, reminding customers to take care of those mortgage payments or start planning college funds for their unborn children. The motif is simple: just art, and a few discreet brochures.

Rossell notes that the exhibit helps create a more “relaxed atmosphere,” taking some of the anxiety out of being at the bank and giving people a new topic of conversation. “It gives you a subject beyond money,” he says.

While the idea of art in a bank may take some getting used to, it shouldn’t come as too much of a shock. Santa Cruz County Banks seem to have picked up on a mantra all too familiar to most Santa Cruzans: If you have the space, why not use it?

Rossell is quick to remind customers that “this is more than a way that the bank can put something pretty on the walls.” An active collaborator with the Independent Council for the Arts (ICA), he maintains that the main objective is to give “more exposure to serious artists.”

The gallery has already become a favorite on the First Friday Arts Walk and is often frequented by local gallery owners. The Bank Arts Collaborative aims to bridge the gap between professional artists and professional galleries.

“We play an intermediate role of giving them [the artists] a venue,” says Rossell, “which they lack from a professional gallery.”

The Santa Cruz County Bank Arts Collaborative is doing its part to keep the local art scene alive, pumping a quick dose of culture into an otherwise humdrum routine and reminding us that art need not be restricted to museums and galleries. Maybe it’s about time more businesses caught on to this. But for now, we’ve already taken art into the streets, so why not take it to the bank?

*“Sensibilities” is currently showing at Santa Cruz County Bank, 325 Soquel Ave., Santa Cruz. The work is open to the public and will be on display through April 30.*