

LOCAL SUN DAY



AT 86, ICONIC ARTIST IS STILL LOOKING FORWARD

Hubbell keeps creating while working to preserve legacy through nonprofit

BY PAM KRAGEN

SANTA YSABEL

Last week, an exhibit of new work by famed artist James Hubbell titled "Autumn" opened at the Santa Ysabel Art Gallery.

The show is named for the time of year, as well as an earthy, amber-hued mixed-media piece in the show. But it also describes the 86-year-old artist himself, who is in the autumn of his life and career.

"My life is full of little coincidences like that," he said.

Hubbell still devotes at least a day and a half each week to personal art-making, but much of his time these days is dedicated to the art of preservation.

At the Santa Ysabel ranch Hubbell and his wife, Anne, have shared for 59 years, he oversees a creative beehive of activity. Staff, interns, apprentices and volunteers help him complete a backlog of



The residence built by James Hubbell in Santa Ysabel. His art gallery there is showing a 43-piece exhibit called "Autumn."

commissions, prepare future art exhibitions, catalog his archive, plan international park projects and expand his famous compound of whimsical handmade buildings.

The goal of all this work is to carry on the Hubbell name, style and humanitarian spirit through

their Ilan-Lael Foundation once they are gone.

The Hubbells formed the nonprofit arts education group in 1982. Then, when the Cedar wildfire burned down four of the eight buildings on their property in 2003, they put the ranch in the foundation's

trust. It's still the Hubbells' home, but it also serves as the headquarters for Ilan-Lael, which is the Hebrew phrase for "a tree that comes from God."

"We were looking for a name that connected the physical world with the spiritual world," Hubbell said, "and a tree does that."

Over the past four years, symptoms of Parkinson's disease have reduced Hubbell's ability to draw and paint as he once did. But just as he has done with other obstacles placed in his path, Hubbell said he's found a path around his health problems.

"I figure that you work with what you've got. If you don't have much, you still have something," he said. "I'm very grateful for what I have, and we have a lot of work right now. You could say I'm addicted to work."

Annie Rowley, gallerist at the Santa Ysabel gallery and a longtime friend, said she's always amazed at Hubbell's positive and forward-thinking nature.

"He always sees the bright side of things," Rowley said. "He had a few

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really bad days after his house burned down. But on the third day he was making lemonade out of the whole thing. He was thinking about the foundation, fundraising, rebuilding and looking at how this experience would inspire his plans for the future."

Since the gallery opened 25 years ago, Hubbell and his work have been an enduring presence. To help the fledgling gallery, he lent his work for its grand-opening exhibition and he has continued to show regularly in the homelike gallery near where Highways 78 and 79 meet.

The 43-piece "Autumn" exhibit is all recent work. It includes watercolors Hubbell painted about six or seven years ago during trips to the Sierra mountains, a few sculptures and several mixed-media assemblages.

Assemblage is a new art form Hubbell turned to four years ago when the Parkinson's-related shaking in his hands hampered his ability to draw and paint. The surgical implant of a deep brain stimulator last year has since reduced the shaking significantly.

"If I paint with a brush, the brush accentuates the shaking, but with a grease crayon I can push on that and it doesn't have as much shaking," he said. "I can't draw quite as well but at least I can design things. The surgery was a huge thing for me."

Rowley said she loves the work in the "Autumn" exhibition because it shows a mature artist who is continuing to evolve.

"We wanted this to be a show of new work," Rowley said. "We wanted to stay current with him

rather than just have a show that says James used to be such a good artist."

Finding the commonalities between man and the organic elements of his environment has been at the heart of Hubbell's work for more than 60 years.

Educated in the mid-1950s at the Whitney Art School in New Haven, Conn., and later the Cranbrook Art Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., Hubbell started out in sculpting and expanded into many other forms, including home design.

He cites among his influences the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright, the expressionistic style of Modernist Spanish architect Antonio Gaudí (creator of the fantastical Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona), the abstract forms of African sculpture and the meditative qualities of Buddhism.

The Hubbells bought the 40-acre Santa Ysabel ranch land in 1958 and raised four sons there, including Drew, a San Diego architect who has been Hubbell's business partner since the mid-1990s. Together, father and son built many of the buildings at the Santa Ysabel compound as well as custom homes, museums, schools, chapels, sculpture gardens and seven public parks throughout the Pacific Rim.

Every Father's Day since 1983, the Hubbells have opened their ranch for public tours to raise money for Ilan-Lael. Art and architecture fans from around the world fly in each year in to walk through the imaginatively shaped "habitable sculptures" on the property, which resemble the Hobbit houses in Peter Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" films.

Hubbell's signature design el-

ements are soaring curved roofs, domes and arches, hand-textured clay, curled metals, colorful stained-glass windows and hand-cut tile mosaics, all inspired by the natural shapes of shells, leaves, rocks, vines, trees, ocean waves and waterfalls. As in nature, there are few straight lines.

Rowley said Hubbell's earthy, organic style has been a revelation for many gallery visitors over the years: "The young people who come suddenly realize that life is not just about right angles."

Most days at the ranch, Hubbell supervises a studio of metal and glass artists who have been working on the property for more than 25 years. He also has two architect interns from Ohio who are helping him with bigger commissions this fall.

Current projects include sculptural columns for St. James Catholic Church in Solana Beach and a large stained-glass window for San Diego Gas & Electric.

Through Ilan-Lael, Hubbell said he's looking to build an eighth Pacific Rim park in China next fall. And there are plans to build a caretaker's hut for the property once the Hubbells are no longer living on-site.

For friends like Rowley, looking at that eventuality is difficult. She said most people don't know how beloved a figure Hubbell has become for the residents in the Julian area.

"James Hubbell tends to belong to the bigger world as an artist, but for us he is very special," she said. "When an area has an artist like James, it really does a lot of good for everyone, and it sets a level of integrity as far as the art is concerned."