

# STUDIO MONTCLAIR CELEBRATES ITS OWN

June 7, 2017

*Mary Lou Johnston, right, at the opening of "Rememberin David Johnston," an exhibition of her late husband's work at the Studio Montclair in the Academy Square building Friday night, May 19. Adam Anik/For Montclair Local.*

*Good Works: Studio Montclair*

*Celebrates Our Volunteers*

*SMI Gallery @ Academy Square (ground floor)*

*Remembering David Johnston*

*SMI Virginia S. Block Gallery*

*(second floor)*

*33 Plymouth St. (at Trinity Place)*

*through July 28*

[Studiomontclair.org](http://Studiomontclair.org)

By GWEN OREL

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Studio Montclair often organizes shows by theme or style.

It offers its members the opportunity to exhibit in Montclair and elsewhere: right now, for example, SMI is presenting "ViewPoints 2017," a juried exhibit, at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, in Newark, throughout the month of June.

A nonprofit organization, Studio Montclair was founded in 1997, and has more than 350 members worldwide. SMI offers support to its members., giving them the opportunity to exhibit their work at the SMI galleries at Academy Square and at the Montclair Public Library, and to participate in developmental workshops and peer critique groups.

Now, SMI presents two shows that celebrate the people who've kept the group running, and who have inspired it. "Good Works: Studio Montclair Celebrates Our Volunteers" celebrates the work of the volunteers who hang the paintings, prepare the press materials, and generally organize the shows. "Good Works" was curated by Gina Murray and RitaMarie Cimini.

"Remembering David Johnston (1933-2016)" celebrates long-time Studio Montclair member David Johnston, a well-known artist whose work was shown at the Montclair Art Museum and around the world. The show was curated by Robert J. Koenig, director of the Montclair Art Museum from 1980 to 1991.

*"Spears from Unearthed Artifacts Series," by Virginia Schaffer Block is in "Good Works: Studio Montclair Honors Our Volunteers." Courtesy Studio Montclair.*

## GOOD WORKS

Studio Montclair Executive Director Susanna Baker said at the opening of the two exhibits on Friday, May 19, that the volunteers "make Studio Montclair work." The show features the work of 35 artists. "Most members want to get involved and give back. Everybody likes to have a work on the wall, not in the closet."

Paula Stark, a Montclair artist, exhibits "Zig Zag" in the show. The work is made of small collages, made of painted pieces of paper, depicting an island in Maine, Stark said. "It's what I see. I put it together like a quilt."

Lucille Scurti of Rutherford is exhibiting a vase titled "Walking Around." "Clay and horses are my two passions," Scurti said. She has been a member of Studio Montclair for five years. "It's a community. There is like-mindedness. I get to know people."

For gallery director Virginia Block, the volunteer show is a rare opportunity to showcase her work at SMI: she often curates exhibits, so cannot include her own creations.

Her piece, in the “Spears from Unearthed Artifacts Series,” was inspired by archaeology, she said: “I like the way they divide space into cordons with string.” She used shredded black glass, called “embedded lava,” to give the piece texture.

*“Jumping Green,” by David Johnston, 2001, is in “Remembering David Johnston” at Studio Montclair. Courtesy Studio Montclair.*

## REMEMBERING DAVID JOHNSTON

The David Johnston exhibit is a retrospective of the artist’s work from 1958 to 2016.

The posthumous exhibit includes acrylic works, abstract mixed mediums on Japanese paper, and serigraphs. Virginia Block worked with Johnston’s widow, Mary Lou Johnston, and with curator Robert Koenig to put the show together.

“David was a close friend,” said Koenig during the opening of the exhibit, which was full of family and friends of the artist. Johnston’s work

*Former MAM Director Robert Koenig, curator of the  
“Remembering David Johnston,”(1933-2016) exhibition at the  
Studio Montclair in the Academy Square building Friday night,  
May 19. Courtesy Studio Montclair.*

impressed Koenig the first time he saw it, in 1980, in Montclair Mayor Grant Gille’s office.

Koenig went to see more of Johnston’s work in his studio, and offered the artist an exhibit at MAM. Two of Johnston’s works are in MAM’s permanent collection; photographs of them appear in the SMI show. Koenig said he was drawn by “the color and very inventive design. He worked in watercolor, which is an unforgiving medium. If you make a mistake, you throw it away.”

In an essay Koenig wrote about Johnston for SMI’s website, Koenig writes that Johnston “achieved his best successes in that medium. ... He also had an affinity for the art of China and Japan, where painting in ink on paper reached its apogee.”

The artist's widow, Mary Lou Johnston, said that having the retrospective "feels wonderful. He would feel proud Studio Montclair chose to do that."

Mary Lou said that she met her husband when both worked in summer stock: Mary Lou was an apprentice in props, and Johnston was a scenic artist. He thought he would become a set designer at that time, she said.

Over the years there were times he wanted to give up painting, but she encouraged him. He had shows in France, Italy and England, she said.

Some of the pieces in the show are from her own collection. "Bell Hop," from 2007, is one of her favorites: she loves the humor in the way the bellhop is made up of a bellhop's tray, and looks like an automaton.

Illusion, Koenig writes in his essay, is something that Johnston had learned from being a stage designer.

Toward the end of his life, Johnston suffered cognitive decline, but "he kept painting as his health declined," Koenig said.

In 2014's "Babalu Babalu," an acrylic on canvas, the curved shapes and bright colors might seem less proportioned than earlier paintings, he writes in his curator's note, "but to me, as his loving friend and harshest critic, it is a coherent farewell to a lifetime of serious, determined, and joyous effort."