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Fiddling Around - New Jersey artists are instrumental to symphony

A dozen artists team up and get funky with New Jersey Symphony Orchestra violins By Laurie Granieri

Hamilton's Thomas Kelly usually creates his trademark moody narrative paintings on wide swaths of canvas. He has worked on board, paper and wood, but painting two scenes on an unprimed violin - a New Jersey Symphony Orchestra violin, no less - was daunting.



"It's a tricky shape," says Kelly, 39, who works primarily in acrylics. "It's the womanly shape that Picasso and everybody liked to use in their paintings, but not as the shape of the canvas."

Alice Golebo, NJSO's manager of special events, commissioned Kelly and 11 other artists (including J. Seward Johnson of Princeton) to create art works using donated violins as their "canvasses."

The project, in its second year, is part of a program called Art Strings. Art Strings is essentially a creative fund-raiser for the symphony's educational programs.

Ten of the instruments, which are not playable, are being raffled off at \$25 a ticket. The selling season runs to June 30. At 11 a.m. that day, the winners' names will be drawn in Newark.

The remaining pair of violins, one by landscape artist Dannielle Mick of Parsippany and another by sculptor Joan Goldsmith of Livingston, will be auctioned on eBay this month. They are valued at \$2,000 each.

In the meantime, the violins are on display at NJSO concerts around the state. The instruments will be exhibited at the State Theatre in New Brunswick 3-5 p.m. May 4 and 8-10 p.m. May 15. The hitch is that to get a peek at the violins, one must also purchase a ticket to that particular NJSO concert.

For those who want to view the violins without attending a concert, they will be on view from noon to 4 p.m. May 18 at Hamilton's Grounds for Sculpture. Admission to the sculpture park is \$10.

Kelly's violin is painted in his signature quirky style, in which he sets attenuated, pared-down figures against an austere, relatively flat background.

On one side of the violin, in an image titled "The Piano Lesson," a man plays a baby-grand piano; a woman curls up on a sofa, her shoes tossed absently on the floor. On the reverse is "Beginning of the Ovation," an image of a musician beginning to bow to an audience in a concert hall.



"I wanted to do something musical because of the nature of the project, and I wanted to make you forget you were looking at a violin, actually I wanted you to get into the painting and forget about the outside parameters," says Kelly.

Golembo says a similar fund-raiser for the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra inspired her to try out Art Strings in New Jersey.

Golembo proposed the Art Strings concept to the NJSO, and "It caught the imagination of everybody," she says. She says raffling 10 violins raised \$26,000 last year.

The artists have not been precious about their treatment of the works. Last year, half the artists painted the violins, and the other half "ripped them apart and made self-standing sculptures," she says.

This year is no different: One violin features a fantastical, three-dimensional "Peter and the Wolf" setup; another picks up on the

sensual shape of the instrument with an image of a nude female torso.

"It was, 'Here's your violin; do with it as you please,'" Kelly says.

Pretty heady stuff - artists let loose to explore, break down, reconfigure and reimagine.