



Small But Mighty

A glimpse into Robert-Jean Ray's 2-by-1½-inch world

by Vanessa Morganstern

In a world of supersize everything, Robert-Jean Ray delightfully bucks the bigger-is-better mentality. The French-born, Sacramento-based

artist specializes in small-format drawings, collages and mixed-media works—none of them larger than 2 inches by 1½ inches—that have been exhibited in galleries throughout the United States. He also curates a very popular small-format art show in Sacramento.

Ray began focusing on small-format work in 1984, during a two-year assignment with the U.S. Air Force in Sicily. Although his tiny living quarters weren't conducive to large-scale painting, he wasn't discouraged in the least. Determined to make a go of it, Ray adapted by using a pocket-sized sketchbook, several drawing tools and a watercolor kit. His first collage was done on an Italian postage stamp—the size of our first-class postage stamp.

The prolific artist's familiarity with Sacramento is twofold: After he graduated from high school in Germany, Ray's mother brought him and his younger sister to Sacramento, where French friends of hers were already living. (Had she not left Europe, Ray would have been conscripted into the French army.) Upon turning 18, Ray joined the U.S. Air Force, putting in eight years of military service. His Italian tour of duty behind him, Ray returned to the river city in 1986 and began doing small-format figure drawing and printmaking. "Eventually, I wanted to change up my imagery a bit, so I started working more extensively in collage," he says. "With collage, I was able to develop abstract surfaces that served as backdrops for my drawings and prints of heads." This new series not only garnered recognition but led to exhibits at local galleries such as Solomon Dubnick Gallery, Exploding Head Gallery and b. sakata garo.

While working primarily as an artist, Ray also pursued curatorial projects. In 1987, he curated his first show, *Reaching Back, Stepping Forward*, followed by a show called *Bad A's: Apartheid, AIDS, and Armament*. "This is when I really caught the curatorial bug," he recalls. "I started recognizing the amazing work that was being created by Sacramento-based artists. My next goal

was to get Sacramento artists into the Bay Area, and bring Bay Area artists to Sacramento by developing theme-oriented group shows that brought together Bay Area, Central Valley and Sierra Foothill artists.”

His first small-format art exhibition was at Axis Gallery (formerly 750 Gallery) in 1996. “The response was amazing,” says Ray.

At the beginning of his career, Ray was influenced by the works of early-20th-century modernists Paul Klee, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Henry Matisse. He later discovered the collage of abstract expressionism, Italian Arte Povera and neo-expressionism. Inspired by urban street graphics since the early 2000s, Ray takes great joy in merging human depictions with mixed-media collage compositions. While many artists display their creations on canvas, Ray wants his artwork to “fit in the palm of your hand.” When asked about a typical workday, Ray congenially holds forth about his routine. “My art days normally start with a walkabout—primarily in Midtown and downtown,” he says. “I’m always looking for interesting scraps of paper that I can incorporate into my pieces. I prefer to work in my studio. However, since my work is so small, I can work anywhere I choose. Before cafes became really popular, I would spend a lot of time [in them] drinking coffee or beer, and work on art. When I’m creating, I’m usually working on approximately seven pieces at a time. At any given moment, I’m equipped with a glue stick, scissors, paper scraps and an ink pen—my tools of choice.” His current exhibition, *Micro Visions: Smaller Than Small*, will run from Feb. 4 through March 1 at Red Dot Gallery and 21TEN Loft Gallery in Midtown. No work is larger than 2 inches by 1½ inches. None of the wall art is framed (Ray wants the viewer to experience a direct visual connection), and there are sculptural pieces as well as paintings. “Over time, I developed special methods for displaying work of this scale—primarily by using my work as specimens,” says Ray.

Red Dot Gallery will showcase the work of more than 30 artists from the Bay Area, Central Valley and Sierra Nevada foothill regions of Northern California who are “willing to work at my scale,” says Ray. Participants range from emerging artists to established talents such as Ken Waterstreet, Eric Dahlin, Lou Bermingham, Carol Dalton and Ron Peetz. One street and one block away, 21TEN Loft Gallery will feature artwork from Ray’s collection, collaborations with other artists, and micro artwork from Ray’s Collage Sessions workshops.

Inspired by postminimalist Richard Tuttle’s installations and painter/graphic artist Robert Rauschenberg’s scrap metal constructions, Ray’s unframed miniature creations are wall-display ready. If you’re far-sighted, bring your glasses—the pieces showcased in this exhibition are no larger nor smaller than a matchbox.

Aficionados looking for a one-of-a-kind masterpiece are in luck: Exhibition artwork is for sale. Original pieces range from \$25 to \$300.

Micro Visions: Smaller Than Small will run from Feb. 4 through March 1 at Red Dot Gallery (2231 J St.) and 21TEN Loft Gallery (2110 K St.). Red Dot Gallery will host a Second Saturday reception on Feb. 8 from 5 to 9 p.m.