

Creating with Words in Sonoma County

ARTrail Artists open their studios October 12 – 13 and 19 – 20, 2013

by Sherrie Lovler

While tourists meander the rolling hills of northern California's Sonoma County, with its grape vines and wine tastings, artists are tucked away in their studios creating their work. The Sonoma Arts Council selects some of these artists to open their homes and studios on two October weekends for ARTrails, a self-directed tour now in its 28th year.

To visit over 150 artists, join us at ARTrails October 12 – 13 and 19 – 20. The complete ARTrails catalog is online at www.artrails.org

I will be joining their ranks this fall and inviting the public into my studio. As a new member of this community, I was interested in how other artists use words in their work. My inquiries received an enthusiastic response, which led to a variety of conversations about their creative processes. Some use words as a starting point; others as graphic elements or a focus for meditation. Some want the words to be read; others don't. Each has a unique approach, and the artists I spoke with generously opened their studios to share their ideas.

Sargam Griffin

"Words are important," says Sargam Griffin. "They help people relate to the work. I don't use words in every painting, and sometimes they are the initial inspiration for the entire piece." She adds, "I'm selective with words. They are more powerful than

I wanted to admit most of my life."

Sometimes the words she uses visually tie the piece together, directing the viewer's eyes, as in *Life doesn't frighten me at All*. In Sargam's handwritten forms, the letters capture the sense of immediacy which contrasts to the serene figure looking out at the chaos life often brings.

Sargam thinks deeply about words; the word "toast" woke her up at 3:30 one morning. She says, "Toast is one of the most undervalued things in life – bread. It represents survival. As far as politics, our systems – the whole financial crisis – are going to toast. They don't work anymore. And then, a toast is for celebration."

This idea began a series of graffiti pieces. "I got instruction from a graffiti artist, and we spray-painted on cardboard and on the wall, and we really got wild." Then she covered a door panel with silver leaf and epoxy resin to represent the finer things in life. In large graffiti-style lettering she spray-painted the word "toast" over the silver leaf, combining elegance with the street – with the rawness of life.

In her own home, she retains a sense of simplicity and calm. Above her bed, overlooking a breathtaking view of a vineyard in Healdsburg, is a canvas she painted



Sargam Griffin Above: *Life doesn't frighten me at All*, oil on canvas triptych, 36"x36". This painting speaks of fearless and honest living; right: *Eat Toast*, 72"x30", graffiti over silver leaf with epoxy resin, 2012, from the *What is TOAST* series.



Gerald Huth Right: *Seeking Turfan*, mixed media collage, 36"x28", 2010; below: *Long Live the King*, mixed media collage, 36"x 28", 2013

purely white. When asked why, she says, "Because it represents endless possibilities. And it doesn't need anything on it."

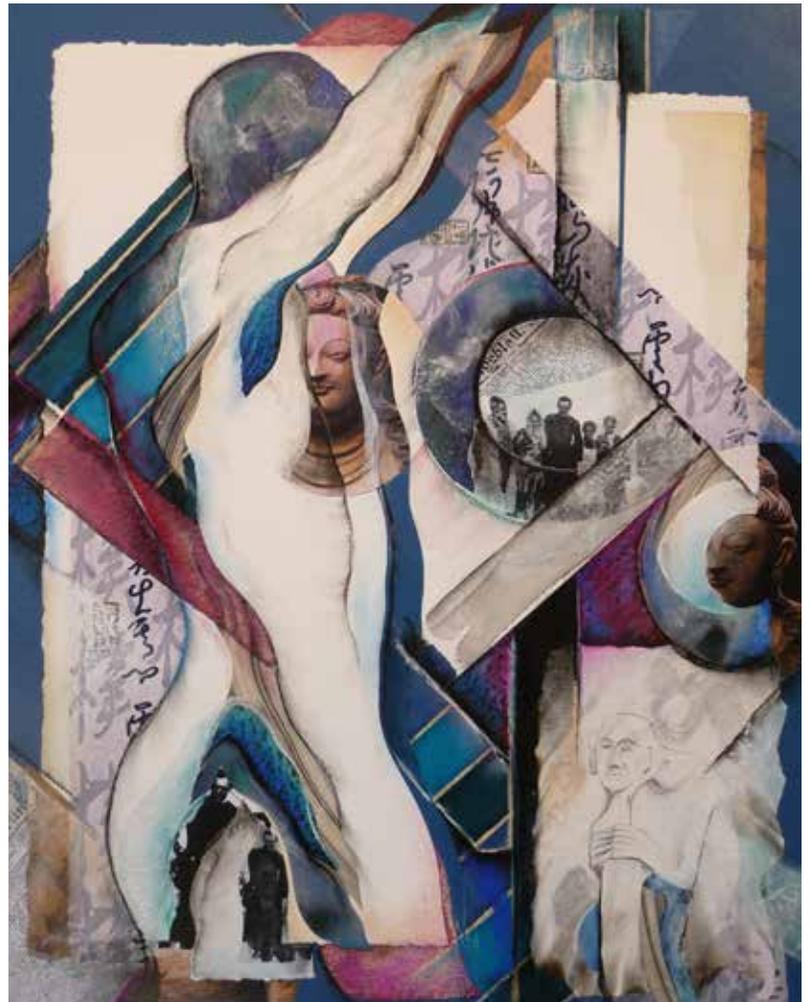
Visit *Sargam Griffin's* studio at 15586 Pozzan Road, Healdsburg 95448; www.sargamgriffin.com

Gerald Huth

Gerald Huth's strong and colorful collages fill his studio in Forestville, not just on the walls, but on his free-standing cylinder pieces, too; an invitation to walk around and spin them, too. Filled with stories from Asia, some personal about his grandfather, others about Buddhist beliefs and traditions, his collages hold messages in Asian alphabets, mostly unreadable, embedded in paper.

"I buy paper. That page I bought in Laos. I'm an Asia traveler. I volunteer every year at a foundation for street children in Cambodia. And so I collect papers, usually from Cambodia or Thailand, some from Laos, India and that whole area." says Huth.

"When I had things that had to do with India, I used Sanskrit script, and when there were things inspired

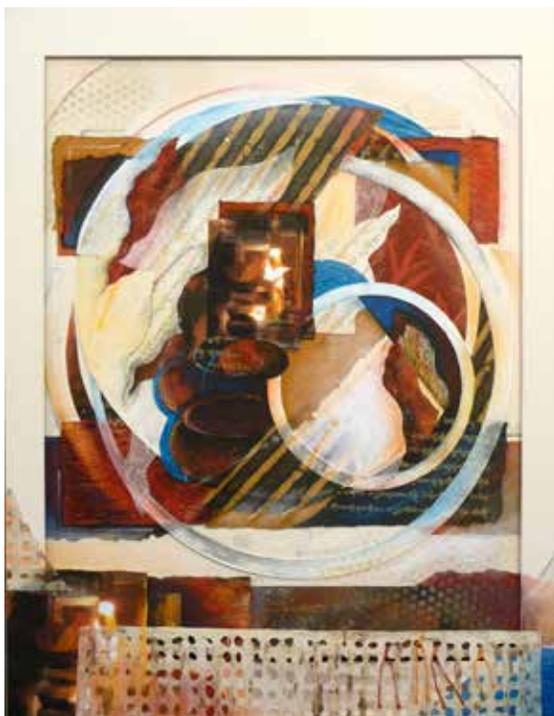


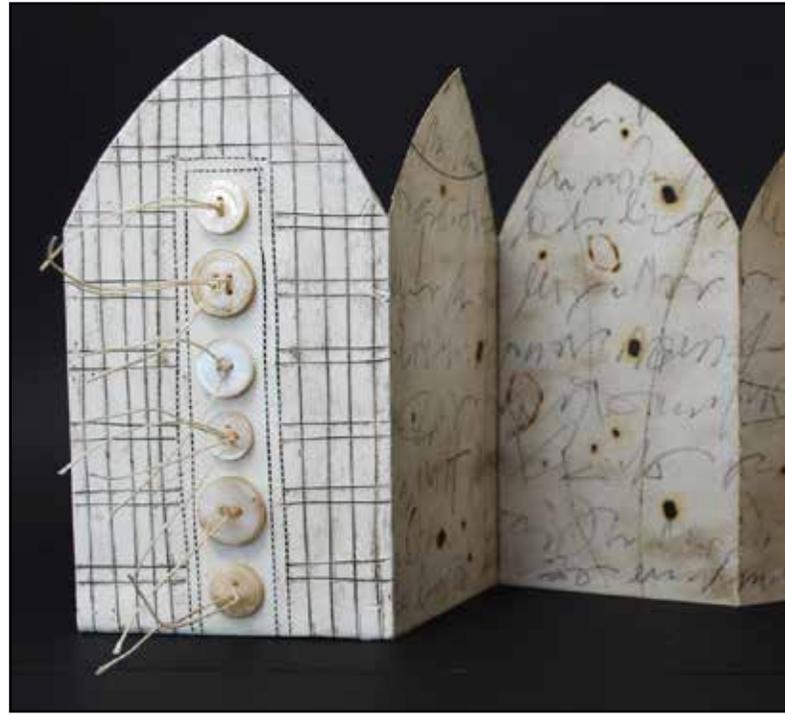
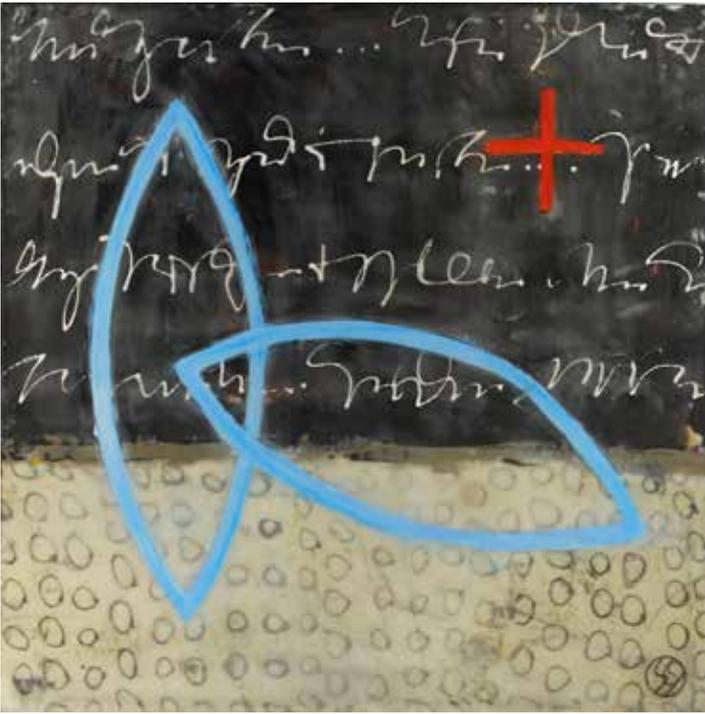
by the drawings I had done in Thailand I used Thai. I brought back lots of newspaper. But now, I like the rhythm, I like the abstraction of the letters themselves. I like the fact that most people here can't read them. I mean, some are not even real letters, but they are takeoffs on letters, on alphabets."

Gerald uses the direction of the text to help create a sense of energy of the piece. "Where there's a flow this way because the circle is off-center to the right, we go that way and we get pulled back. Here I use Sanskrit. This is from a Hindi newspaper, using it as a diagonal in some places, as a horizontal in other places, helps to create what I call, 'lines of force' in the piece."

Huth's artwork keeps evolving. He says, "The last body of work this year has become much more abstract again, much more improvisational. Less planning goes into it. More intuitiveness. I really like that. I just go where it takes me."

Visit *Gerald Huth's* studio at 5895 Anderson Road, Forestville 95436; www.geraldhuthart.com





Susan Stover Top left; *Alt click 2*, 12"x12", encaustic, mixed media, 2012; top center: *Whispers*, approx. 4"x6" closed and 6"x14" open, paper, encaustic, mixed media, 2012

Susan Stover

Not far from the center of Graton, Susan Stover's studio is situated just off her garden. A sense of earthly delight surrounds her work area and finds its way into her art as well. There is an organic quality to her encaustics, not just because she is working with wax, but the layering of marks weaves a story as if time erased some parts and revealed others.

"I'm dividing up the space and making marks and layering with wax. I do a lot of scraping back to previous layers and that's how I can reveal parts and hide other parts. It's a constant process of layering and removing and working back and forth, till I get a surface and colors that feel right," Sue explains about her process.

"The calligraphy I have in my work is like writing that doesn't say anything, so viewers can infer their own meaning." She adds, "I'm really interested in graffiti and the idea of leaving one's mark." Her marks are often scribbles made with graphite, forming linear patterns. "I was a weaver for a long time. In graduate school I was making up my own symbols, my own sort of language, and I stayed with it. Now they're beginning to get more obscure and more like drawing."

Bookmaking is also one of Susan's passions, and she

has a large series of blank books with encaustic covers as well as an artist's book combining sewing with scrawled lines and buttons in an arched-shaped accordion design.

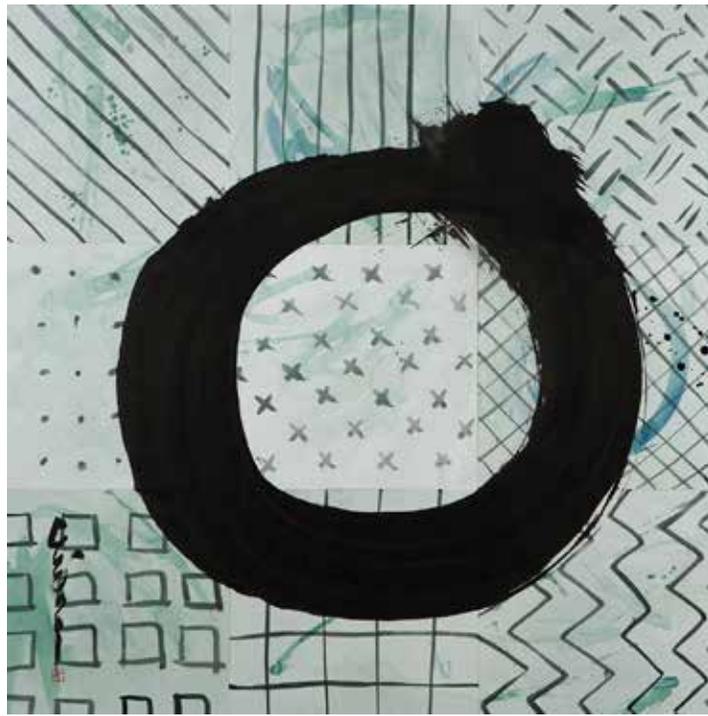
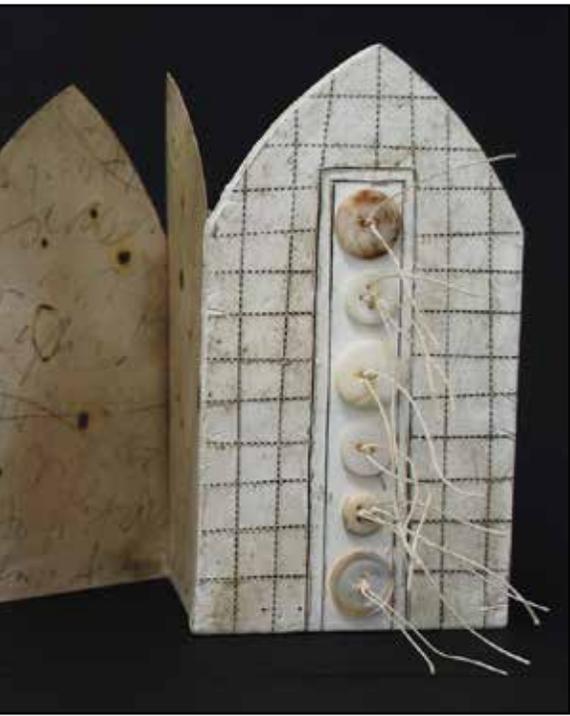
Visit Susan Stover's studio at 3625 N Edison Street, Graton 95444; www.susanstover.com

Mario Uribe

Mario Uribe started appreciating letters at a very early age. In elementary school in Mexico, he spent a lot of time writing. Because his parents had lived in China, he was also exposed to Asian calligraphy. "I loved it. I knew it was writing, but I didn't understand it. I just loved the shapes and the energy and the brush stroke and the ink and paper."

During Bob Metheny's college classes in San Diego, Mario fell in love with western calligraphy. He reflects on the importance of "both the teacher that has this passion and the student who recognizes it and identifies with it. That's when I bought my Osmiroid pen. I wrote everything with it, checks, everything."

By the time he met the Japanese calligrapher and Zen teacher Kaz Tanahashi, around 24 years ago, Mario was ready for full immersion. "I followed him everywhere. I would say, 'let me help you.' We went all over the country doing workshops, and I got so good at doing the number one, the first stroke, the bone stroke, and Kaz would talk about it, and when it came to showing how it was done, he would have me do it,



Mario Uribe Top right; *All Together*, 48"x48", mixed media on paper, 2006, created for a one man exhibit in Korea that same year; Above; *Enso (Circle Aspect)*, scroll-like piece is 50"x30", mixed media, 2010

'cause I did it better than he. And I was westernized, so I became his teacher for stretching canvas and using acrylic. At that point, he only worked on paper with black ink. So we traded a lot of information."

Mario is best-known for painting the enso, a circle, which is the Japanese word for circle. He says, "It's the most pleasing shape symbolizing the universe, earth, lifecycle, wholeness. It's universal. Beyond that, I love how it's the perfect symbol for the moment: never the same twice, always unique, surprisingly emotional, funny, powerful, and shy."

"I'm still in love with it. I never tire."

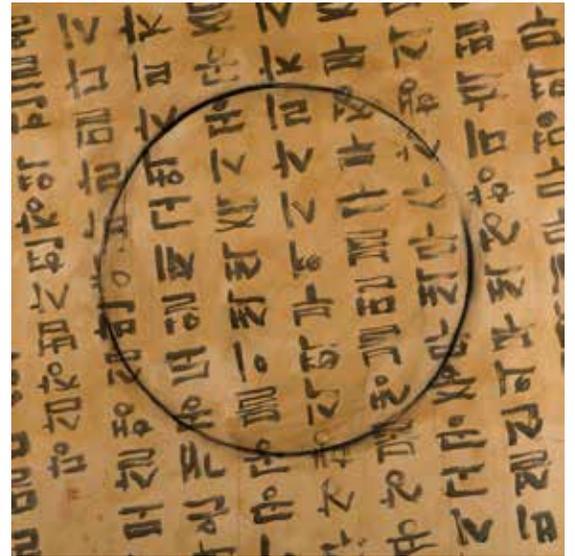
Visit Mario Uribe's studio at SEI SHIN Studio, Art Alley in SOFA Arts District, off S. A St, Santa Rosa 95401; www.mariouribe.com

Peter Crompton

A walk on Peter Crompton's land is a shift back in time — about 2,000 years ago — and to another continent. This is the land of ancient Greek statues. Carefully placed between gardens overlooking a rich countryside, a chicken coop and a beehive, sculpted heads stick out of the ground, and hands five feet tall can take your breath away.

Peter is a theater scenery construction teacher at Santa Rosa Community College. He makes stage — and his own — sculptures out of concrete. Peter describes the method: "I build these up in layers, five or six layers

Mario Uribe 48"x 48", mixed media on paper, 2006, created for a one man exhibit in Korea that same year. Korean "Hangul" writing is a fragment of the Heart Sutra.



of concrete. It's on a foam core with a fiberglass mesh to encapsulate it. Underneath it all is gray concrete. And then you can see there's a layer of reddish concrete. And then I build up more orange concrete. And there are stains on top of that. And gold leaf."

Peter recites a Longfellow poem from his inscription on a five-foot-tall modeled neck of Psyche. It is lettered with a pencil then chipped away to make it look ancient, like the sculpture. Some of his works are large masks with writing on the inside. His wife, Robin, adds mosaics on some of the pieces, often using symbols and Greek words.

"If you see the words, you think there's a meaning there, and there is, and it makes you look at the piece more closely. And sometimes you can't figure out what it means, because I obscure it," says Peter. Some words are meant to be read — if you can read Greek. Inscribed on the Herms (signposts on ancient Greek

roads) are the words "Go on your way, and do good deeds." But you have to look closely, for the letters are as worn as a 2,000-year-old sculpture.

Visit Peter Crompton's studio at 4367 Raymonde Way, Santa Rosa 95404, www.cromptondesign.com

Peter Crompton *Sibyl*, mosaic on concrete, 31"x3"x10", 2012, In classical Greece female prophets were known as Sibyls. The most famous of these was the Delphic Sybil, who is reputed to have told Socrates: "Know Thyself." We reproduced this in her iris.



Valerie Adams

Valerie Adams has been a calligrapher since high school. Her first paying job was lettering the graduation certificates for Sonoma State University. She taught calligraphy at the art store in Santa Rosa and started a graphic design business with a friend. When Valerie fell in love with fused glass, one of her main goals was to combine her two passions and put lettering on glass.

But how? How can she actually write on the glass? And then, how does it withstand 1500° temperature and not melt away? How can she bring in other calligraphic elements, partial words and marks? These have been her questions, and through years of experimenting, she has found a way.

"Writing on glass that's smooth is so much harder than writing on paper where there's some tooth to it. So I take a refractory paper, which is paper that can survive the heat of the kiln, and I write on the paper with glass paint. Then I put the paper down and I put the glass on top of it. I only fuse it enough to do what's called a tack fuse; it's only enough to grab the paint, and then I can cut this out or cut out bits of it."

Other experiments include making pieces out of five layers of glass to build depth. Here she can incorporate paper and calligraphic lettering along with gestural writing. She sometimes works with powdered



Peter Crompton *Psyche Sings*, concrete, 79"x59"x46", 2011, Psyche was blindfolded so that she would not realize that her lover, Eros, was a god. Her name has come to be synonymous with "soul." The poem inscribed on her neck is the last verse of a Tennyson opus about sex, death and surrender.



glass, "but once you touch glass, the oils from your hand are going to show up when it's fused. It's got to be completely pristine. So I've been using pencil erasers, chopsticks, and all sorts of things to try to manipulate the writing without touching the glass, a process which has really eroded my handwriting," Valerie says, smiling. Her enthusiasm belies her struggles and challenges, as do her pieces, which show off her strong sense of graphic design.

Visit Valerie Adams's studio at 3018 Santa Anita Court, Santa Rosa 95405; www.ValerieAdamsGlass.com

Sherrie Lovler

My work has been evolving over decades of being dedicated to calligraphy. Now, instead of feeling like a calligrapher branching out to create paintings, I feel like a painter whose main influence is calligraphy. By bringing together the tools, materials, training, and history of calligraphy, but not being bound to the letter, even to the illegible letter, I find a great sense of freedom.

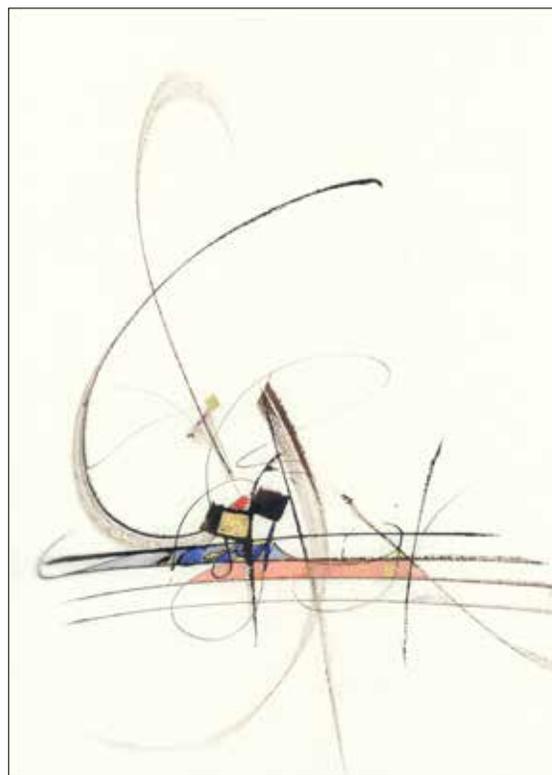
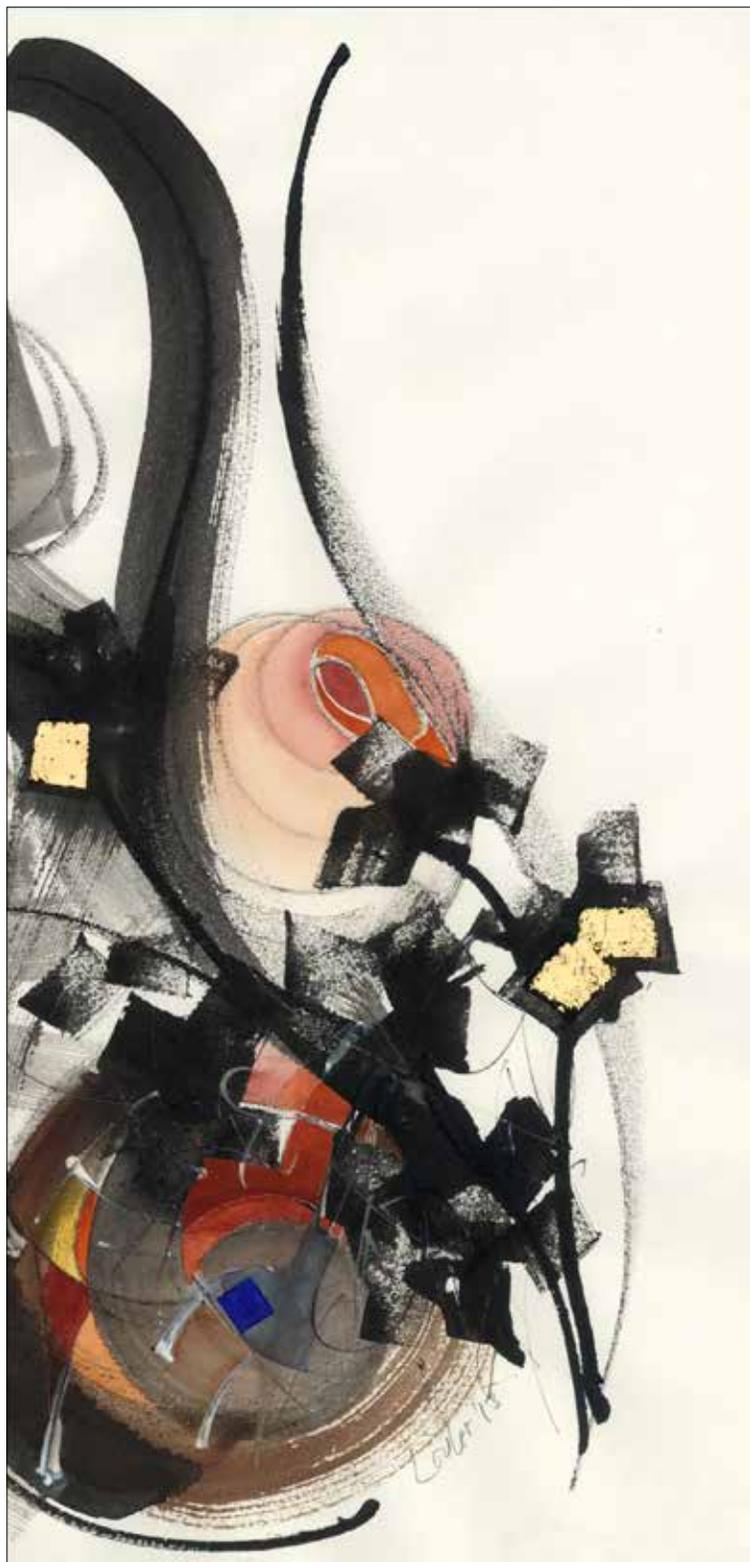
Words still hold prominence in my art, even if they don't appear in it. These are the words of my own poetry. Writing poetry is a spiritual practice for me.



Valerie Adams Top: *Crazy Quilt*, fused glass 8"x8"x 3/4", 2009. A thick block of glass incorporating layers of mark-making experiments; bottom: *Fly Away*, fused glass and paper, 8"x 8"x5/8", 2011. Multiple layers of glass are pre-fired before being assembled and fired into a thick block. A collage background adds depth.

Sherrie Lovler Top right: *Letters on Staff*, walnut ink, watercolor, gold leaf, 10"x14", 2013. Lettered using a piece of mat board. First in my series on music.

Below: *The Dancer*, Sumi ink, watercolor, gouache, gold leaf, 8"x16.5", 2013. Inspired by my poem of the same name.



Twice a week, I start my day reading from an inspiring book and, when something moves me, I begin to write a poem. It feels as if I'm opening a doorway into the unknown. My goal has been to keep that doorway open to create my paintings.

When I've finished a poem, I wait until an image forms in my mind. It's usually some marks — a circle with lines or some calligraphic strokes. These become the beginning of my painting. That's all I need: a starting place to help me face the blank paper. The rest comes from dialoging with what is already happening.

I work with ink and water, gouache and watercolor. I like the fluidity of these media. They create parts that can't be controlled. I'm learning to embrace the Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi — finding beauty in imperfection, simplicity and impermanence. It is taking over my former obsession with perfectionism, and it feels so much more alive.

Visit Sherrie Lovler's studio at 2012 Humboldt Street, Santa Rosa 95404; www.artandpoetry.com 

Calligraphy has been **Sherrie Lovler's** passion since holding her first Speedball pen at age 15. She is currently exploring painting using calligraphic techniques on a large scale. Her recent work is 51 inches by 30 feet. Sherrie will be teaching calligraphy as abstract painting at Letters California Style in February, 2014.