

Jackson Hole News & Guide

Villinski butterflies soar into magical realism

By Kelsey Dayton



Long Island artist Paul Villinski explores flight in his new show, "Beyond," which goes up Tuesday at Tayloe Piggott Gallery. In "Pegasus," he created a life-sized horse out of discarded pallets.

"Each butterfly is like a brushstroke. It's just about deploying these butterflies, like brushstrokes, in different ways."

Though Villinski creates bodies of work without butterflies, his new exhibition "Beyond," which opens Tuesday at Tayloe Piggott Gallery, features the winged creatures in almost all the work on display.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a wooden horse Villinski created with reclaimed shipping pallets. It stands 16 hands high. White butterflies cascade down its body. It is the first animal form Villinski created and one of the most monumental pieces he has ever tackled, designing it specifically for the gallery space.

No one wanted the crushed beer cans. They were smashed, run over and left in the gutter. In them Paul Villinski saw a metaphor for ideas he was exploring in his art dealing with addiction.

He cut them into butterflies, a symbol of change and recovery.

More than 20 years later Villinski is still working with butterflies, an element he's become known for including in his art.

"I'm really engaged with this metaphor of transformation that butterflies represent," Villinski said. "For me they are like paint, and I do different types of painting with each one."

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Villinski grew up a city kid, but in middle school he took riding lessons.

“I still remember how astonishing the feeling of power was,” he said. “I think there is a reason people are deeply involved with horses and have been for centuries and centuries.”

The use of butterflies in this work contrasts two species, one small and delicate and one massive and strong. Together they show how all living things on Earth are linked, he said.

“There really isn’t any separation between any living organism on the planet,” he said. “We are all one.”

A ladder with a chair precariously balanced on it is another major piece in the show.



Long Island artist Paul Villinski explores flight in his show “Beyond” at Tayloe Piggott Gallery. “Burst” is made of vinyl records and wire.

The ladder and chair, like so many objects Villinski uses in his artwork, spoke to him when he stumbled across them.

He brought them to his studio where he stared and played with them before the idea for sculpture formed.

Villinski likes to create moments of magical realism, where the ordinary has a touch of the fantastical.

“I like to create things where people are presented with something that puts them in a state of wonder, at least for a moment,” he said. “That’s really what that piece is trying to do for me. You see it and think ‘what?’ because it doesn’t really make sense physically.”

It took embedded weights to get the chair balanced. Then Villinski added butterflies to look like they are helping the chair levitate.

The third major piece in the show is the only one to not include butterflies. Instead Villinski cut birds from vinyl records, designing them to burst from the center. Looking closely at the piece viewers can see the record album and artist.

The show also features baroque-looking frames painted monochromatically to match the butterflies attached.

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“I wanted to just look at the frame itself and take the artwork out of it and try to retain some of the meaning of the frame while transforming into a contemporary art work,” Villinski said.

The frames are floated a few inches off the wall, and the butterflies make their way across in the openings.

They are a relief in the installation process. Many of Villinski’s pieces require placing one butterfly at a time on the wall, following a detailed map to create the work. His frame series can hang much faster.

The show features many of those delicate installations, with butterflies floating across the wall that take hours to hang just so. The emotional reaction they elicit make hard work worth it.

“I want to create this moment of wonder for people, and the butterfly is a really interesting vehicle to do it,” Villinski said. “Butterflies are kind of flying flowers to begin with. They are so magical and evocative.”

Villinski showed at Tayloe Piggott Gallery four years ago.

“It was probably one of the most moving shows I remember having because it hit every age group and both female and male,” owner Tayloe Piggott said.

The work, while serious, brings joy, and Piggott watched patrons leave smiling.

His work alters the gallery space dramatically and creates a new environment, Piggott said. Even walking into the show is affecting and an experience in itself.

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