

Paula Fava explores the elements using encaustic, wax



Fire, earth, air, water and sky are the five Hindu elements explored in an exhibit of work by former firefighter Paula Fava. Photos courtesy of the artist.

by **Jacoba Charles**

In a room that smells faintly of tar and honey, charred colors play across large wooden panels. This is the acrylic, encaustic and mixed media work of artist and former San Francisco firefighter Paula Fava.

"I've always been attracted to fire," said Fava, who was raised in a house behind the fire station in Sacramento and now lives in Inverness Park. Fava dreamed of being a firefighter from the time she was five; that wasn't an option for little girls in the 1950s, so she grew up to study modern dance and journalism instead.

Her mother was an artist and a dancer, and as a teenager Fava picked up a camera and began to make art of her own. She was always good with her hands: if she saw something nifty, she would try to make it. And while working in marketing and public relations for a pager company, she started a small jewelry-making business with her sister.

The San Francisco Fire Department was opened to women in 1989 after an extended lawsuit; four years later Fava applied and placed fifteenth out of 6,000 people who took the entrance exam. For the next 14 years she lived her childhood dream.

"I've seen everything from people who committed suicide to horrible accidents on the Golden Gate Bridge," Fava said. "And, a good amount of fires. Everything is so fast and furious when you go to a fire scene."

One of the more memorable moments in her career included helping a woman whose legs had been shattered by a hit and run driver. Her legs were held together by nothing more than her black stockings, Fava recalled, describing how she talked with the woman as she drifted in and out of consciousness. A week later, she was told that she was the only visitor the woman wanted to come to the hospital.

"That really spoke to how we touch people's lives and we don't really know it," Fava said. "Every day we all make an impact on each other and have no idea."

While driving fire engines and working on haz-mat crews for her job, Fava remained inspired to take photographs and make art. On repeated trips to Hawaii she swam with dolphins, and began making silk paintings inspired by that experience. The paintings later became prayer flags and altarpieces.

Fava signed up for a painting class shortly after she moved to West Marin in 2001. It was one week after September 11 and ten days after her father died. "Art just exploded out of me," she said. In the process she felt connected to her identity as a firefighter, to her father and also to her mother who had died years before.

"When I started painting I used a lot of yellows and reds, and made series that involved the towers and my father's blue eyes," she said. "Definitely it was a lot of processing—frustration, sadness, disappointment, an inability to go to New York and help."

During that time, she also felt that her mom was nearby, a spirit sipping tea in a corner of the room while she painted. The next year she got married, and when she changed her name she took that of her mother—Fava—as well as her husband's. Now she goes by Paula Fava as an artist, and Paula Fava Corcoran in her personal life.

In 2003 an Indian guru entered Fava's life and art when she attended a lecture by Swami Sri Kaleshwar at Ions in Petaluma.

"I was raised Catholic and I haven't disowned it," she said. "But I was taught by my first nun that there is no wrong religion and I've kept opening my heart to what is out there."

Over the last five years Fava has been to India four times to visit Kaleshwar, who is known as a living saint and a national treasure in India. "I'll be honest: I'm still testing this all out," she said. "But when something is working you want more of it. Everything that he's offered so far as a healing technique or a teaching has worked; I can't deny that."

On her last visit, Kaleshwar invited his students to make a wish—a wild, outrageous, selfless wish—that would be his gift to them. Fava struggled with what to ask for, and after talking with some friends realized her wish boiled down to art.

"Our teacher tells us that the biggest pain in the world is heartbreak. We all carry it with us," she said. "I want people to be healed of heartbreak through just

looking at my art."

Last week—less than a year after making her wish—Fava's first solo show opened at Gallery Route One in Point Reyes Station.

"I've already had two strangers contact me, and they said, 'I cannot believe this but I feel like it healed the pain in my heart,'" said Fava, who wrote of her wish in the artist statement displayed at the gallery. "To me, it's like, 'Gosh if it happened to even one person then that's enough.'"

In the show, Fava used understated swathes of pigment and intricate Indian prints to explore themes of earth, fire, air, water and sky—the five elements in the Hindu tradition.

On one panel, white tones floats like smoke across a background of ashy gray. On another, a russet corner flares with the patterns of paper or a white-painted wall that has just begun to burn.

These are the pieces that Fava is most satisfied with—and it's no coincidence that they are fiery.

"It's an earthy, guttural chemical reaction," she said about her process of combining roofing compound with beeswax and encaustic pigments using a blowtorch. "I've always been earth and fire in my alchemical makeup. Over the last few years I've brought in water and air with all the spiritual work I'm doing, but I might have gone back to my roots with those last pieces."