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## New Modern Japanese

### Fantasies and penitentiaries Two JC artists explore the mythical and psychological

by Mary Paul Reporter Staff Writer Jan 10, 2008 | 179 views | 0 | 2 | |

Sarah Emily Johns and Raymond E. Mingst share two things besides a middle initial: they both have a dedicated passion for art and they each opened an art exhibit in Jersey City this month. Johns' fantasy paintings at White Star Bar in Hamilton Park and Mingst's "Work of the Penitent" at Curious Matter in Harsimus Cove represent very different styles and artistic visions, though both stir the imagination.

#### Mermaids and minotaurs

Sarah Emily Johns grew up in Jacksonville, Fla., but she graduated from St. Aloysius High School while living in Jersey City, where her sister still resides, and where Johns' road to becoming a professional painter began.

"I did the Jersey City Visual and Performing Arts High School program at NJCU. And I hope that program's still getting so much support because I picked up a paintbrush because of them."

Though, Johns, 25, lives in West Virginia these days, she came up to Jersey for her show at White Star Bar, where her artwork is proudly display.

Her canvases hang over the booths that line the dining area front to back, and their brilliant use of color liven the atmosphere. The White Star also gave her a warm reception worthy of her work, a welcome that doesn't come so easily considering her subjects. Her almost gothic yet romantic portraits beautifully capture creatures of legend and mythology - mermaids, pixies, harpies, minotaurs, centaurs, and others bred by her fantastical imagination.

"You really have a hard time as a fantasy artist. A lot of people don't want to show fantasy art ... I've had galleries show my work, and they'll put it in the corner and put a plastic tree in front of it - it's funny though," she laughed, explaining that she doesn't let that stuff bother her. "I've had people look at dragons and go, 'Oh, what a pretty horse. It's a little weird looking, but...' " But, she added that she believes some eyes just aren't trained to see the fantasy world she creates.

However, Johns explained that right now the fantasy genre is booming due to the success of *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, but Johns has loved all things that dwell in the realm of mystical and mythical.

"I [recently] did a piece that was a zebra centaur, and I showed it to my mother, and she goes, 'Oh, hang on!' and she gets out this old album that she let us draw in when we were kids, and I had it signed and dated at 9 years old, and it was a zebra centaur," said Johns. "Long after it goes out of style, I'll still be doing fantasy art."

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Johns' work will be on display through the end of the month. The White Star Bar, 230 Brunswick St., is open Sunday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 2 a.m., and Fridays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 3 a.m. For more information, call (201) 653-9234 or visit [www.whitestarbar.com](http://www.whitestarbar.com).

**Prisons and circles**

Raymond E. Mingst seems like a good example of how the metropolitan art scene is shifting some of its focus to the this side of the Hudson River. In 1999, Mingst moved his studio from Manhattan to Jersey City. He and co-founder Arthur Bruso, a fellow artist, opened Curious Matter early this year.

"The exhibition space is a sort of laboratory of ideas, serving our own work and that of other artists," wrote Mingst in an e-mail.

The latest conceptual creation to show in this space is Mingst's "Work of the Penitent," comprised of 15 drawings - some in black ink and some in acrylic - done on blueprints for maximum security prisons. The inexpensive and tentative nature of blueprints gives greater conceptual dimension to his pieces.

Inspired by the Quaker notion of prisoner rehabilitation in penitentiaries, Mingst's drawings use shapes to form abstract spacial relationships with the underlying blueprints, evoking feelings of being buried or uncovered. Connotations of the circle of life and planetary cycles are also evident in this juxtaposition.

"Ideas about my own history and imagined histories are at play in this series. I'm creating mandalas [a symbolic graphic image or pattern - in this case, a circle - that often encompasses other images] as meditations and atonements. The drawings are penances and the process is about redemption," Mingst wrote.

"Work of the Penitent," new drawings by Mingst, will be on exhibit through Jan. 27. Curious Matter, 272 Fifth St., is open Sundays from noon to 3 p.m. and by appointment. For more information, call (201) 659-5771 or e-mail [curiousmatter@comcast.net](mailto:curiousmatter@comcast.net).

*Comments on this story can be sent to [Mpaul@hudsonreporter.com](mailto:Mpaul@hudsonreporter.com).*



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