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# san pedro

MAGAZINE



*Reason No. 21: Muriel & John Olguin*

## 20 Reasons to Love San Pedro

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Muriel Olguin (Taso Papadakis)

## the Matriarch of the San Pedro Art Scene Muriel Olguin

by Joanie Harmon

From childhood, Muriel Olguin always hoped she would be able to be a painter after her first experience with art.

“When I was in kindergarten at Leland Street School,” she recalls, “I made a painting, it might have been a watercolor. To me, it was so beautiful, I ran out of the door to show my mother, even though school wasn’t out yet. I just had to show her.”

This enthusiasm led to the Wilmington native’s pursuit of higher education in art, with a B.A. from Occidental College and an M.F.A. from CSU Long Beach, where she studied drawing, painting and printmaking. She has contributed to the education of other artists with her years of teaching in the Los Angeles school system and at Pepperdine University. Local artist Debbie Marr was in Olguin’s class at Hudnell High School in Inglewood.

“Hudnell was classified as a continuation school,” says Marr. “The classroom was an all-purpose makeshift room, without the equipment of a typical high school art department. The school didn’t supply Muriel

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with much in art materials and the class consisted of students who were at various grade levels, with either no skills or senior level skills. It must have been tough on Muriel to take one room of kids and teach various levels of art during a one-period class. Yet she managed for all of us to work together and create a mural.”

Marr’s book, *San Pedro – Faces and Places*, is dedicated to Olguin and her husband, John (a San Pedro icon in his own right), in honor of one of the teachers who inspired her to pursue an art career. The artist credits Olguin with teaching her to believe in herself and “never give up.”

“Creating art was one way of keeping me out of trouble during my adolescence,” she notes. “It wasn’t until I was 27 when I found out I could make a living at it. I was given an opportunity to enroll at El Camino College and take a couple of art classes. From that point on, I continued to study various art mediums at various colleges for six years. To this day, I give credit to people like Muriel and my instructors at El Camino College for where I am now.”

“It was a good class,” Olguin says of her Hudnell students. “They were supposedly kids who were a bit rough, but I didn’t think so. We had a good time. They all had different ways of drawing and seeing things.”

Of all the lessons she taught her students over the years, Olguin hopes that the one thing they took away from her classes was the ability “to see the world in a fresh way and to be able to put down what they feel emotionally or what they actually see.”

As one-half of a San Pedro couple that is closely tied to nature, particularly the ocean, Olguin reveals in her canvases a fantastic world of creatures: animals with human parts and vice versa. She describes the process that leads her to painting these curious scenes. “When I do a landscape,” she says, “I know what I’m going to do. But the mysterious animals and weird creatures, kind of gather themselves together and show me where they are. I throw paint on the canvas in every color and let it drip and dry. When it’s dry and has a lot of texture, I turn it all four ways and I see pictures come out of every one of the four ways. Then I decide which one I like the best.”

This fanciful approach to creating art belies Olguin’s strong sense of community and responsibility for her fellow artists. She served as co-chair of the Southern California Woman’s Caucus of the Arts, in order to establish the fair treatment of women artists in the 1960s, when sexism was still the order of the day. As one of the founding members of Angels Gate Cultural Center, she has supported the organization since its establishment as an artists’ collaborative in 1982, serving on its board of directors for 10 years and continuing to encourage its mission.

“It was exciting to help get Angels Gate off the ground,” she says. “It just kind of grew naturally. Nathan Beerbohm is doing a good job. They always have good shows, the most interesting shows around.”

Olguin continues to thrive in a tight artists’ community as a tenant of The Loft. She underscores the benefits of working in such a collegial atmosphere. “It’s very rewarding,” she beams. “We’ve known each other for a long time. Having all those artists right around you is very inspiring, even though our work is very different.”

Olguin’s sense of community extends to actively sharing a love of nature with John, her husband of 58 years. Among his many contributions to San Pedro, John Olguin is best known as director emeritus of the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium he helped to establish. The couple’s appreciation of the natural world has regularly been shared with their hometown at large, although Olguin admits that at the end of the day, she and her husband regularly sleep outdoors. The traditional New Year’s Day “Polar Bear Plunge” at Cabrillo Beach was attended by the pair, despite their suffering from a cold.

“This year was the first time since the Polar Bears started about 50 years ago that we didn’t go in,” she laughs. “But we went down there and cheered them on.”

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