

Artist's work reflects 'The Beauty of the Bonsai'

Benician Elizabeth Koval Maffeo's exhibit finds a home this month in the gallery at Benicia's library

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For Elizabeth Koval Maffeo, it's all in the details.

The Benicia artist grew up in natural history museums. She poured over the pages of National Geographic magazine. She was consumed by the details of natural beauty.

Maffeo's attention to detail was channeled into artwork. She spent her time attempting to reproduce what she saw in nature and in the photographs of National Geographic. She became a photo realist, creating drawings and illustrations that are nearly indistinguishable from reality. From today through the end of March, you can see her work at the Benicia Public Library.

Maffeo grew up in Los Angeles. She has always been an artist, but she hasn't always worked as one. She spent a great deal of her adult life working nine-to-five jobs to pay the bills. When she wasn't at work, she would draw and paint. The schedule was exhausting.

"I needed to be productive every day. I just painted like crazy," she said. "I was burning the candle at both ends."

The artist started selling her art-

work and doing freelance graphic design in the mid '80s. She eventually opened "Koval Designs." She ran a small studio out of her home. Her work was displayed at a few shows, but she never found enough time to focus solely on her artwork.

In 1998, her luck changed. She was hired to build models for a nat-

ural history museum in the Bay Area. She jumped at the opportunity and moved to Benicia.

"The job is great. You don't often get the chance to do art for a living," she said. "I'm really fortunate."

Maffeo worked almost exclusively with nature until her mid 20s. At that point, she began to

examine her Japanese heritage. She realized that her family's culture could be a wealth of inspiration. She began drawing and painting bonsai trees and other Japanese scenes.

"I found my niche," she said.

The exhibit at the Benicia Library exclusively features work from Maffeo's "niche." "Beauty of

the Bonsai" is a collection of mixed-media prints of bonsai trees in their natural habitat. Of course, bonsai trees are normally found within private gardens or homes. As a result, Maffeo's bonsais are set within the scenery of these locations.

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The exhibit also includes a series of five prints called "Kimono Seasons."

"My mother told me that there are five seasons in Japan," said Maffeo. "Winter, spring, summer, fall and the rainy season."

"Kimono Seasons" features a single woman in a kimono against a different backdrop, each one representing a different season.

Maffeo uses watercolor, color pencil and airbrush to create her artwork.

She said that she was liberated by the airbrush, a machine that can spray a very fine stream of paint onto any surface. The tool can reproduce infinite gradations of shading and near-microscopic detail.

The result of this mixture of media and technique is a blend of realism and surrealism. Realistic objects are arranged in a way that wouldn't normally be found in the real world.

For example, in "Fuyu—Dancing on the Wind," a woman in a kimono stands before a sparse flock of cranes. She holds two fans, each painted with the same cranes flying in the distance.

Maffeo said that her artwork is a combination of what she sees and what she imagines in the real world.

"These are my photographs," she said. "I took what I love about Japan and westernized it, made it my own."



This artwork is titled "Natsu, Listening for Balance."

The library's exhibit is only the second time Maffeo's Japanese artwork has been shown and the first time it's been shown in the Bay Area. There will be a reception at the library's Dona Benicia room on Saturday, March 1, from 1 to 4 p.m.

Food and drinks will be provided. Prints of Maffeo's artwork will also be for sale. The show will run until March 27.