

Community News

Photo exhibit highlights when orchards ruled the valley



Photo Jacqueline Ramseyer/Bay Area News Group/April 20, 2017
Photographer Gabriel Ibarra has a new exhibit, "Valley of the Heart's Delight," on display at the Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum through September. Ibarra has been documenting the changing valley for decades.

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“Where once men tilled the soil and reaped a harvest of Gold/Today only identical subdivisions/Occupy paved over lands,” reads a poem by Gabriel Ibarra in the Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum.

The poem is part of Ibarra’s retrospective hailing the “Valley of the Heart’s Delight.” His photography exhibit at the museum features photos of orchards and farmland that Ibarra has been snapping since the mid-1990s in an effort to preserve the images of as many South Bay orchards and farms as he can before they are converted to other uses.

The exhibit features images of lush fields, grainy black and white historical photos, rich colors of barns and blooms, naked fruit trees and infrared photos in which familiar landscapes are captured in an alien glow.

Ibarra says part of his motivation for documenting and preserving different sites, which include Los Gatos, Sunnyvale, Saratoga, Cupertino, San Jose and Milpitas, is to share a bit of the “magic” he says he felt growing up with the orchards that are dwindling in number.

“I grew up at the tail end of the orchard era. I was born in ‘56, and behind us we had 300 acres of pear orchards. We used to play in the orchards. All of the sudden I noticed, boom, they were gone,” says Ibarra. “I wondered what happened to them, and then I found out there were some farms left and I said, ‘Wow, this is like a connection from my past.’”

Using contacts from different historical societies, he was able to interview those with knowledge of the sites and photograph different agricultural sites in the area. One corner of his exhibit is a collage dedicated entirely to Sunnyvale’s Corn Palace, a family-owned stand selling fruits and vegetables on White Oak Lane near busy Lawrence Expressway. Another corner of the exhibit is dedicated to Coyote Valley.

Although he started his project more than 20 years ago, he continues to add to the collection. His most recent shots were taken at the Butcher’s Corner farmhouse in March. The property was owned by the Butcher family, who came to Sunnyvale in 1881. They became pioneers in the fruit-growing industry within the city, and the house still sits on the property, though it too may soon go the way of many of Ibarra’s other subjects. A housing development is planned for the lot it sits on.

“I know change is inevitable, but I started to think, ‘What could I do to save these places?’” says Ibarra.

The name of his exhibit comes from the Santa Clara Valley’s nickname, “The Valley of the Heart’s Delight,” which can be found on some memorabilia in the exhibit. Ibarra explains that the beauty of the area’s orchards and plants were used as a draw to entice settlers to live in the area.

“They wanted people to notice the beauty of it and a point of sale when people came. The problem is that so many people came,” says Ibarra.

Although some of the locations Ibarra has shot and featured in the exhibit are gone, a list of operating fruit orchards is available for visitors. Ibarra says that it was important to him that visitors know where they can still experience orchard life.

“If they look through the fliers, they can see there is a viable way of seeing more of it,” he says.

Ibarra says he first took an interest in photography from an uncle and later took classes in middle school. He still takes photography classes at West Valley College as a hobby while coaching tennis locally.

The Sunnyvale Historical Museum is located at 570 E. Remington Drive and is open Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from noon to 4 p.m. “Valley of the Heart’s Delight” will be in the rotating exhibit room until Sept. 28.



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