Museum features late artist’s work

“The Surreal Visions of Josephine Tota,” a massive exhibit at the Memorial Art Gallery, is the work of a shy and private, complex and sensitive woman who often was short on words but could speak volumes through her vibrant and vivid imagery.

Her depictions are chaotic, dark and dreamlike. Eyes weep blood tears, plants turn into people, and expressions reveal grief, sadness and horror.

By celebrating Tota’s work in this way, the museum is forging new territory — showcasing work by an amateur, unconventional, visionary artist — and has placed itself front and center of a new movement to disintegrate the line between “insider” and “outsider” artists.

See SURREAL, Page 4C
treatments for Tota’s uterine cancer diagnosed with cancer. The radiation band, and both she and her sister were for Tota. She lost her mother and hus-
lifes, and in the 1960s started taking Technology.

daughter Rosamond, she took an art books on art and art history. In the
Library downtown, checking out
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ful/filling, she stayed in the /f_ield until
/finding her work as a seamstress un-
ter breaks, she asked her friend and local artist
Miriam Sellers Lapham to teach her
traditional medieval egg tempera painting techniques — a creative
breakthrough that led to the surreal
style she would stick with until her
death in 1996.

Tota, continued to paint and take
classes, however, and in the late ‘70s
she asked her friend and local artist
Miriam Sellers Lapham to teach her
traditional medieval egg tempera painting techniques — a creative
breakthrough that led to the surreal
style she would stick with until her
death in 1996.

The work she produced in those lat-
er years, an assemblage of allegory,
metaphor and personal stories, “was
so out of character, but at
the same time, it was so freeing,”
Burne Gallery, when Tota blew kisses
on opening night.

“My aunt was director of the Creative Work-
shop, and in the late 70’s and early
80’s, he convinced Tota to

She enjoyed the class immensely,
During her work years, however,
she spent lunch hours at the Rundel
Library downtown, checking out
books on art and art history. In the
1950s, at the urging of her only child
daughter Rosamond, she took an art
class at the Rochester Institute of
Technology.

She enjoyed the class immensely
painting mostly landscapes and still
life, and in the 1960s started taking
classes at the MAG’s Creative Work-
shop.

That decade was filled with tragedy
for Tota: her mother and father both
and both she and her sister were
diagnosed with cancer. The radiation

left her with intense neuropathic pain
that, in addition to everything else, led
to a severe depression, which landed
her in the hospital for shock therapy

if you go

When: Continues through Sept. 9.

Where: Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave.

Cost: Included with gallery admission: $15 adults; $12 seniors; $6 college students and youth 6-18; free ages 5 and under.


Josephine Tota, Untitled (Self-portrait). 1987. PROVIDED BY MEMORIAL ART GALLERY.

Josephine Tota at home, surrounded by her paintings, dressmaker’s mannequin and ceramics, circa 1990. LARRY VERBELL

Arts

Surreal

Continued from Page 1C

“There’s not a comfortable place for
an artist like her to sit in the current
scene,” explains Jessica Marten, curator in charge and curator of American
art for the MAG. “Those intense and
often disturbing images by this woman are not what we expect, and people
don’t quite understand how to
talk about them.”

On view through Sept. 9 are
more than 90 small paintings that speak in
strange, otherworldly and dreamlike
themes to metamorphosis, connection,
physical suffering, trauma, encounters with the medical pro-
ession, aging and loss.

The exhibit includes 14 paintings from the MAG’s permanent collection,
many on loan from Tota’s family and
friends, and a small selection of ce-
sions, masks and textiles. After its
premiere at the MAG, the museum
plans to tour the exhibition.

In 2010, during an inventory of the Memorial Art Gallery’s painting stor-
age room, Marten came across a self-
portrait by Tota.

“She looked so beautiful and
potent,” she says. “My art histori-
ian friend was totally delighted by its
— a painting that simulta-
neously read as both medieval and
conemporary.”

Marten tracked down Tota’s daugh-
ter and great-niece, and, with their
help over the next eight years, the
“Surreal Visions of Josephine To-
ta.”

“This pet project of mine that I had
been wanting to feature and help take
in care of started to grow into something I felt had resonance not
only for Rochester, but beyond,” says
Marten. “This is an artist who needed to be seen and whose story needs to be
told.”

Tota’s history

Born in 1910, Tota was a first-gener-
ation Italian immigrant who endowed
incredible stamina to her family’s passage by boat to the United
States before being stripped and
scrambled by overcrowded conditions during her

In seventh grade she had to leave
school to work in the garment industry
because the painting is electric

“Her work was unlike anything I
had ever seen before,” he says. “But
(it was) the be-
appearance of forms and
and psychological opposition
would be of great interest to others in
the context of the ongoing coming to
terms with the role and treatment
of women.

Not long after that exhibit Tota de-
veloped dementia. While at St. John’s
Hospital on Brighton Avenue, she filled
a sketchbook with drawings, some of
which are included in the current exhi-

What would Tota think of the ex-
hhibit? Rosica recalls being at the Lucy
Burne Gallery, when Tota knew how
she felt about the audience after being introduced
on opening night.

“It was so out of character, but at
some level I think she was veiled, ready to
hurt the accusers and response she
received,” she says. As for “The Surreal
Visions of Josephine Tota” exhibit, “I
think she would still be here, but if she
saw the response and energy on open-
ing night, I think she would be completely
flattered. However, Rosica adds, whether or not it was her aunt’s intent, “she
created these beautiful images that trans-
formed her distress and suffering into
something that was beautiful and

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