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Tourist's first look at NWI will be of region creations

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HAMMOND -- For the next month, many of the tourists who stop at the Indiana Welcome Center to plan their visit, their first view of Northwest Indiana will be paintings, sculptures and other creations by the region's artists.

From Thursday to Sept. 17, vacationers entering Indiana through Hammond on Interstate 80/94 can see the works of 36 local artists in the William F. Wellman Exhibit Hall in the center just off the expressway at Kennedy Avenue.

"We like to feature local and regional talent. We use our hall for exhibiting the work of our artists to -- enhance the visitor's experience while they're here," said Erika Scheeringa, director of public relations for the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority, which operates the tourism center at 7770 Corinne Drive in Hammond.

Scheeringa said the exhibition of works in a variety of media from traditional to digital is the second by the Illiana Artists, a collective that spans Lake and Porter counties in Indiana and Cook County in Illinois.

"It's the second by the group here. They exhibited at the center from mid-January to March in 2008," she said.

She noted that the theme of this year's exhibition marking the 10th anniversary of the distinctive Welcome Center building is "Tourism in Indiana."

Illiana president Maria Braun-Perez, a Hammond graphic artist, said two other art groups -- the Hobart Art League and the 119th Street Artists in Whiting -- have been invited to participate in the show that encompasses the productions of 36 artists.

"We started about 30 years ago. I've heard different people talk about it, so I can't pin it down," she said.

She said the 56-member group is a not-for-profit art organization whose monthly meetings on the second Monday of the month from October through May at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Munster are open to the public.

"This year we're giving gallery talks and trying to have meetings at other venues," she said.

Braun-Perez said she left her job doing production work in marketing for Porter hospitals in 2008 to take online courses at the Art Institute of Chicago.

"I'd been with the Illiana Artists since 2002, and I redid their website to make it more contemporary and informative to add to my portfolio," she said.

She said the Welcome Center show is the second this year for the group, after an exhibition in June at the Cornerstone Gallery inside Centier Bank on 119th Street in Whiting.

"I have a piece in the exhibit called 'Clothesline.' It's kind of a time capsule," Braun-Perez said.

She said she used old family photos of her sister and brother for the digital photo montage of a little girl in a dress and boy dressed like Hopalong Cassidy standing in front of quilts on a clothesline.

"It's taking objects -- some real, some imaginary -- and creating a new environment with as much detail as possible. It's amazing to work with 3-D applications," she said.

She said the Illiana members like the Welcome Center because it gives them a lot of exposure to people coming in from out of state.

For more information, go to www.illianaartists.org.