

Mesmerizing rivers run through solo show

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Daily Progress correspondent

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Among the most popular paintings in the history of art are those that pay homage to nature.

We seldom tire of beautiful views gently caressed with sunlight. When sensitively executed, they invite our prolonged contemplation.

Several paintings sumptuously rendered in oil pigments on linen by Dean Dass, a prominent professor of art at the University of Virginia, celebrate unspoiled scenes of various rivers in this region.

They are among the highlights of his solo exhibition at Les Yeux du Monde gallery through Jan. 12.

Although more widely known for his more innovative compositions, Dass continues to render familiar scenes with lavish brushstrokes and passion.

His views of the shore along Mechums River, Salmon River, Upper Moormans and a pond on Allendale appear animated with life beyond what is clearly visible.

Filled with mesmerizing rhythms, each river depicted

in his paintings suggests more than a natural barrier. It becomes the water of fertility, renewal and purification.

The choreography of Dass's brushstrokes suggests a welcome summer breeze or chilly autumn wind.

Deeply rooted in the ancient earth and vertically ascending skyward, the trees he depicts along the river banks appear symbols of nature's renewal.

The water is animated and filled with life we cannot see. The whispering wind becomes the breath of nature.

In these compositions, Dass includes a suggestion of the destructive forces of nature, such as a pile of broken tree limbs along the shore.

In changing light, the movement of water appears alternately threatening and benign. Sunshine and shade infuse his scenes with both serenity and drama.

Simon Schama, the prominent art historian, has written of the great river cultures of antiquity "where rivers ? and woods are in harmonious balance with each other."

"People who have seen my paintings often come up to me and say they know exactly where on the river my painting is from. But everyone is thinking of a different place. To me, that indicates a larger truth," Dass said.

Viewers who are enthralled with his representations of rivers recognize the association of rivers with life and death. In ancient times, and even today, many rivers were believed to be sacred and more life-enhancing than life-destroying.

Dass also is represented in this show by a series of portrait drawings enhanced with touches of gouache and opaque pigment.

Created during his lengthy sojourn in Paris last spring, the delicate images are of a beautiful woman shyly averting her eyes from the viewers' gaze. She appears to be dissolving in liquid colors that drift across the picture surface.

Very often the figures are enveloped in a cloud, like apparitions that might disappear in the blink of an eye.

In Dass's drawings, the head that represents the entire figure suggests an ethereal image beyond reality.

The drawings become a form of penmanship of the human soul.

The lines dance, curve and melt in air. The colors drift across the paper, as if to music.

"A number of titles in my drawings are directly from Picasso," the artist said. "For instance, 'Nude Woman Imploring the Heavens' is a Picasso title."

A brilliant and influential teacher, Dass is unfazed by short-lived popular movements in the visual arts. His art is timeless and of sustaining appeal.

Lyn Bolen Warren's Les Yeux du Monde gallery, at 115 S. First St., is one block off of the Downtown Mall.

Viewing hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

Call 973-5566.