

# LANDSCAPE

From page 1

in the dark. Under gallery lighting, his audacious use of color makes his canvases almost vibrate with energy.

"His work has drawn the kids in," says gallery director Ron Bishop, referring to Edison College's students. "They have been lured by the intensity of the work. As soon as you hit the doorway, 'Wow!'"

"He certainly knows how to orchestrate color. Mark does everything to the max. The density of the images is as far as he can take it. The color has that same level of usage as the density of the field. He gives every possible perspective he can in every piece. I think that may be in part why the kids relate to it so well."

Messersmith's Southern landscapes show the uneasy co-existence of man and nature. Or, if you want to be more blunt, his work shows how people are destroying wildlife's natural habitat and squeezing it into smaller and smaller spaces.

In an artist's statement, Messersmith writes, "The Southern landscape I paint is, at least for a while, still out there somewhere, somewhere just beyond the urban sprawl, our shopping malls, and trailer parks. It is a land still inhabited by powerful birds, vigilant panthers, wary gators, black water swamps, old Cypress trees, back road citrus stands, and careening logging trucks..."

His paintings are so rich with imagery you can stand in front of one for a half hour and still not see everything he's included.

The works are over six feet tall and many are also six feet wide. But Messersmith has so much to depict that the canvas alone is not enough for him. Atop each painting are friezes echoing a scene on the canvas. In "Summer Solstice Morning 2007," for example, the sculpture on top shows an alligator with a clear panel in its stomach, revealing two human skeletons.

At the bottom of each painting he's added a series of predella boxes. (Predella is an Italian term for painted panels of narrative scenes that ran across the bottom of Italian altarpieces.) Messersmith uses mixed media, and "Dark Waters" includes not only mixed media predella boxes but a series of five painted panels above it, a kind of double layer of predella boxes.

According to Bishop, in a talk Messersmith gave at the gallery, the artist said he was influenced by illuminated manuscripts. He was referring to the predella boxes and panels, but it's obvious Messersmith was also influenced by the bright, luminescent colors of the manuscript images.

## If you go

- >>What: "A Southern Landscape"
- >>When: through Dec. 8
- >>Where: The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Edison College, 8099 College Parkway
- >>Cost: Free
- >>Information: Call 489-9313 or go to [www.bobRauschenberggallery.com](http://www.bobRauschenberggallery.com). Gallery is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Closed Sundays and holidays.

"The Southern landscape I paint is, at least for a while, still out there somewhere, somewhere just beyond the urban sprawl, our shopping malls, and trailer parks."

— Artist Mark Messersmith

Not only does Messersmith include sculpture on top and predella boxes below, but he adds sculpture to some pieces, making them three-dimensional. "Vespertine" has a crooked ladder and a butterfly hanging, mobile-like, in front of its canvas. Others have a crutch ("Dark Waters"), or an oar ("Summer Solstice Morning 2007.")

"It's not enough for him to use the canvas," Bishop says. "He's got to do stuff on the top and in front of it, and he's got to go on the bottom. The illuminated manuscripts gave him the idea to not only do the boxes on the bottom but to step outside of the pieces."

Look at a series of Messersmith's paintings and you'll see fowl, fish and reptile living and fighting. But you'll also see other recurring images: logging trucks representing the loss of forests, helicopters with piercing searchlights hovering above, factories belching black smoke, wild dogs with demonic red glowing eyes fighting and chasing deer, telephone poles and wires, billboards and bus stations.

In "Afternoon of a Faun" two deer scamper down a street past a Greyhound bus station, chased by wild dogs. Signs of mankind are everywhere: a billboard, gas stations, logging trucks, a motel.

In "Edge of Town," a car drives through the foreground, flames shooting out of the hood. The driver has his left arm out the window, his glowing cigarette throwing off sparks. Seated next to him: a skeleton, and a naked woman. Passing him in the opposite direction is a logging truck with flames coming out of its exhaust pipe and tires. While herons take flight, heli-



COURTESY PHOTOS

Artist Mark Messersmith is a professor of art at Florida State University. His exhibit runs through Dec. 8 at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the campus of Edison College.



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copters fill the sky above the buildings and billboards.

In person, Bishop says, Messersmith, a professor of art at Tallahassee's Florida State University, is "the opposite of his paintings, in a way. He's a very gentle, unassuming sort of fellow, very nonchalant about what he's doing."

As if to balance the horrors of mankind's rampant destruction of nature, Messersmith's painted a series of 162 still lifes at St. Marks National Wildlife Preserve in North Florida between 2003 and 2007. The exhibit at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery displays 30 of them, all lined up on the back wall.

"He went out into the field and did the painting," Bishop says. "In the

studio, he can control everything, in a sense. Out in the field, it takes time to do these, and all the while he's working, time doesn't stop, shadows move. They're very direct, loose. They have the same technique of painting, you see the brush strokes."

Think of them as before and after images: this is what Northern Florida looked like before mankind trashed it.

"A Southern Landscape," which runs at the gallery through Dec. 8, is well-worth return visits. Messersmith's work is rich and rewarding; the more you look at his paintings, the more you see. ■

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