

TLHLife

'SUMMER TIME' ARTIST TOOK FALL TO SELF-DISCOVERY

From trucker to painter



TOP LEFT: "Melancholy Sun" is currently hanging in Jefferson Arts Gallery's summer show. **BOTTOM LEFT:** "Night at the Port," acrylic by Steve Johnson. **ABOVE:** Steve Johnson enjoys plein air or open air painting. PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE JOHNSON

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Seven years ago, Steve Johnson fell off a tractor-trailer, shattered his ankle, and unknowingly landed himself into a career as an artist.

Johnson had played guitar since age 9, but not even music could beat his boredom during his post-surgery bed rest. He flipped on the television to PBS and was greeted by none other than the nationally renowned and cheery painter, Bob Ross. Johnson asked his wife to pick up a paint set from the store, then followed Ross through 50 paintings before realizing he might be in for a change of career.

"There was a silver lining in falling off of that truck," reflects Johnson. "I know when it happened

it was pretty terrible, but if I knew then how my life would change because of it, I would gladly do it again."

Today, Johnson is president of the Jefferson Arts Gallery. His main goal is promoting the arts in Monticello, and he is excited to share the gallery's summer member show "Summer Time," running through Aug. 29. He didn't give up trucking right away, however. Prior to this new role, Johnson's relationship with art was one of self-discovery.

Though it wasn't his first path, Johnson was never to a stranger to art. Born in small town Moresville, North Carolina, his grandmother introduced

See PAINTER, Page 4C

If you go

What: Jefferson Arts Gallery Summer Member Show "Summer Time"

When: 10 a.m.-2 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday through Aug. 29

Where: Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 West Washington St., Monticello

Cost: Free admission

Contact: For more information, visit <http://www.jeffersonarts-gallery.com/index.html>.



"No Life Guard on Duty" in pastel by Steve Johnson. STEVE JOHNSON

Painter

Continued from Page 1C

him to drawing with the purchase of a sketchpad, charcoals and pencils. He quickly developed an aptitude for it and so she got him a set of paints as well.

However, when his friends poked fun at his amateur work Johnson stopped altogether. Later in life, he moved to Florida where he began driving trucks.

Fast-forward past his recovery and Johnson was back on the road, primarily delivering to the docks in Jacksonville. Working within union hours, he would find pockets of two to three hours during breaks while on the job. In his cab he brought along his guitar, easel, charcoals, and paints to fill the time, drawing what he saw in various ports. Another catalyst came shortly thereafter when he ran into local artist Gary Garrett who introduced him to plein air, or open air painting, and the First Coast Plein Air Painters.

"I went the next day with the group and fell in love," says Johnson, who became good friends with Garrett and went on to paint outside with them every weekend.

His artistic renaissance had just begun. Driving afforded Johnson time to think candidly about his creative processes. He wondered why his eye gravitated towards the worn, rundown buildings and manmade objects in a landscape and came up with the defining characteristics of his personal style and voice. Playing guitar had taught him to see mathematical patterns in music and Johnson reasoned that it must be the same for when he composed art.

"When I would look at objects like barns or crooked telephone poles, I liked the ones that were falling apart because it seemed like Mother Nature had bent these objects into her canvas and made them fit to blend with the rhythm and harmony of what surrounds it," describes Johnson.

In this time, Johnson was consuming books on style and art history as well as attending workshops. One day in the library he ran across a pastel artwork and fell in love with the look of the medium. He looked up the artist, Lyn Asselta, and was one of the first members to join her First Coast Pastel Society in St. Augustine.

Asselta became Johnson's mentor, teaching him classic art school methods on color theory, value and composition.

He enjoyed the "wildness" of her style and wanted to emulate her aesthetic, but soon came into his own personal style of semi-abstract landscapes. Johnson especially appreciated what he calls the simplest advice that Asselta gave him — to stand back and squint at your work to gain a new perspective on the composition.

"The greatest day of my art life was when I started a semi-abstract painting, finished it up that night, and was bringing it in to a show when [Asselta] saw it," says Johnson. "She had a fit over it and bought it before I could hang it."

His wife was his biggest supporter, encouraging him to leave trucking and begin entering his paintings into shows. Johnson became a twice-invited artist to the "Brush with Nature" plein air event in Jacksonville, and a guest artist for the opening of the new gardens at The Cummer Museum and the Big Cat Rescue. He was also awarded for pastel work in Ponte Vedre Art Center, and has held many solo shows across north Florida.

Recently, Johnson has found that keeping his shoulder and wrist loose allows for more experimentation with movement and energy in his brushstrokes. He also began looking more closely at his under paintings, the marks he would make prior to starting a piece. Like a Rorschach test, he started piecing together figures and scenes out of the random strokes he saw when he stepped back and squinted.

It's the process that he used for his work, "Melancholy Sun" which is currently hanging in Jefferson Arts Gallery's summer show.

As president of the gallery, he has a long list of administrative goals too. His initiatives range from recruiting more young artists by providing classes and community engagement opportunities to writing grants and creating major plein air and art walk events by 2020. Looking back on the past few years however, his greatest takeaway has been to pass along the inspiration that was gifted to him while he sat on his couch with his ankle propped up.

"If it wasn't for Bob Ross, I never would have picked up a paintbrush," remarks Johnson. "So if someone looks at my paintings and says 'I want to do that,' and it inspires them, that means the most to me."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).