



The Philosopher II, oil on canvas, 2018 by Mark Messersmith. MARK MESSERSMITH

PRIMAL PAINT

Fate of fauna at heart of Messersmith's art

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An osprey swooped low over artist Mark Messersmith's head, with a fish tightly secured in its talons. He followed the bird's flight across the sky, intently watching as an eagle pursued it in a hurried chase hoping for an easy meal.

An iteration of that particular scene ended up in one of his paintings, along with many other encounters from the St. Mark's National Wildlife Ref-

uge. In another instance, a bobcat strolled leisurely past Messersmith as he silently painted in almost-stillness.

"It's impressive to see those animals in the wild," says Messersmith, whose populous paintings boast all varieties of Floridian flora and fauna.

These quiet moments burst in prismatic splendor on his canvas — straying away from the earth tones, Messersmith opts for a shimmering, sat-

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If you go

What: Art as Social Commentary: Mark Messersmith When No One is Watching

When: Opening Reception & Gallery Talks 6-8 p.m. Friday, exhibition on display through Dec. 15

Where: Gadsden Arts Center & Museum, 13 North Madison St., Quincy

Cost: \$5 suggested admission

Contact: For more information please call 850-875-4866 or visit <https://gadsdenarts.org/>.



Self portrait by Mark Messersmith. MARK MESSERSMITH

Paint

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urated palette. His paintings are far from simplified eye-candy, however, as the juxtaposed images contemplate the fate of these natural wonders and the beings that inhabit them.

Hailing from the Midwest farming belt, Messersmith grew up surrounded by cornfields and manicured lawns. It wasn't until he moved to Florida that he experienced alligators and big birds sauntering about his everyday surroundings.

Investigating this relationship with nature is at the heart of his solo exhibition, "When No One is Watching," which will feature an opening reception at the Gadsden Arts Center and Museum on Sept. 28.

"I was taken with the fact that those things are still out there on a cusp between existence and nonexistence," says Messersmith. "The paintings are about that moment while they're still here hanging on, and our choice of preserving them or continuing on with what we're doing."

A Tallahassee resident of the past 30 years, Messersmith is an art professor at Florida State University. He wasn't truly exposed to art until he attended college and graduate school, and received the encouragement and support of his father and many instructors along that way.

Just as a scientist engages in daily experimentation, Messersmith spends his time outside the classroom in his studio. Working with students will often spur "crazy insights," in a continual, reciprocal relationship that fuels his creative research and investigative processes. Messersmith never walks into the studio expecting to do something he's never done before, and instead builds off a foundation of previous explorations.

"You don't ever want to get it perfect," remarks Messersmith. "You always want to think that tomorrow, I'll do it better, and there's always a tomorrow."

Starting with a seed of an idea from a field book or image he's encountered, he begins painting until the rest of the characters fall into place. Messersmith describes the process as a three-way dialogue between painter, canvas and subject matter. The "primal-ness" of the paint has kept him fascinated with the medium as he enjoys the simplicity of only needing oils, pigment and cloth.

He's been described as a post-modern romantic painter and admits that he resides somewhere between "happy and apocalyptic." Messersmith is drawn to the northeastern painters who trav-

eled to Florida by railroad at the turn of the century, like Martin Johnson Heade who depicted dreamy scenes of an untouched sea and landscape.

"They were painting Florida from an outsider's perspective and looking at it through rose-colored glasses," says Messersmith. "They could see that the forests were being chopped down, houses were being built, the water was being spoiled, and the game and wildlife was being chased away. But they still saw Florida as this kind of magical place, this kind of Eden."

Messersmith is equally captivated with philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg's concept of parallel existences and painter George Inness' belief in making portals through his paintings. Combining those two thoughts, he sees his own work as a way of unifying the animals and landmarks from his memory with what remains.

"They are about the state of the world and the state of Florida," says Messersmith. "It won't be long until all that stuff will be gone and we won't even know it. It's that moment between hope and despair, not totally apocalyptic yet, but brushing up against it."

Not contained to just his canvas, the paintings appearing in his solo exhibition as part of Gadsden Arts Center & Museum's "Art as Social Commentary" series are framed by free-standing, carved wooden animals. The work is on display through Dec. 15, and Messersmith is eager to see how the paintings in "When No One is Watching" will fit together as they're released from the confines of his studio and into the wild of the gallery space.

Messersmith sees magic in paint as an illusory medium and believes in its power to convince viewers of just about anything they can imagine. He feels that viewers are an integral part of the creative process and hopes his paintings will encourage them to take their experiences and read multiple interpretations into the work.

As far as impacts beyond the Tallahassee community, 90 percent of the proceeds from Messersmith's sold paintings will go to the Nature Conservancy so that the uniqueness of Florida is not lost for future generations.

"There are different ways you can change the world," says Messersmith. "You can be a politician, a fundraiser, an environmentalist, an educator. I think the arts, in general, can be one of those ways not to preach or lecture people, but sneak the information to them so they start to discover it for themselves."

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).