

# ‘Spiritual underpinning’

## Dean Gioia’s ghosts come to light in ‘Haunted’ paintings at Gadsden Arts

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Council on Culture & Arts

The pandemic has continued to have a profound effect on definitions of “normalcy.” For painter Dean Gioia, this altered state has meant conjuring up spirits from supernatural realms — both visible and invisible. His “Haunted” exhibition at Gadsden Arts Center’s Munroe Family Community Gallery showcases his mastery of light as he highlights the ethereal within landscapes.

“At the beginning, there was a panic that this (virus) could get completely out of hand, and I was a lot more fearful then,” reflects Gioia, 71. “You just get used to living under a certain weight of reality. On the psychological side, it was around July where I went ahead and put a ghost in a painting to see what would happen.”



**Dean Gioia**

Gioia’s work is in hundreds of public and private collections including the Florida Museum of Natural History, IBM, Barnett Bank, Florida State University and the City of Tallahassee. As he enters his fifth decade of painting southern landscapes, his “Haunted” exhibit allowed him a chance to face fear head on and experiment with memory and presence. His Zoom art talk on Feb. 5 will give the public a glimpse into this process.

“The show is looking backward and looking forward at the same time,” describes Gioia. “I’ve always thought a lot about death and what that is and what it means. As the event horizon is shortening it’s like, what are you doing? What are you going to do with the time that is left?”

Gioia credits his “paranormal childhood” to his familiarity with spirituality in painting. As a child, he always felt as if he could travel to another world. Gioia uses this ingenuity when it comes to his style and approach to the canvas. Landscapes become something more than dotting a skyline with trees. A deeper meaning lingers underneath the image.

Gioia was praised for his artwork in junior high school. He dabbled in watercolors before settling into acrylic paints. At Florida State University, he earned a degree in cinematography and sold his paintings on the side for cash. Gioia has held the title of full-time artist ever since. At the core of his inspiration is The Hudson River School, a mid-19th century American art movement that focused on landscapes.

“They saw nature the way I saw nature,” says Gioia. “Their paintings have a very luminous, spiritual quality to them.”

According to Gioia, luminosity is a particularly tough characteristic to achieve. The canvas first needs to have a dark underpainting in order to achieve a sense of light. Gioia prepares his canvases by painting them with a gold, gray wash. He holds

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### If you go

**What:** Art Talk Live with Dean Gioia

**When:** 1 p.m., Friday, Feb. 5

**Where:** Online on Zoom

Contact: For more information, how to register, please



Dean Gioia’s “The Return” is part of the exhibit at Gadsden Arts. Gioia began introducing apparitions into his work when the pandemic began. DEAN GIOIA/SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



“Midnight Visitor” by Dean Gioia is part of his “Haunted” exhibit at Gadsden Arts.

DEAN GIOIA/SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



Dean Gioia, a local painter, works on a scene of trees and a path from a photograph he took. ALICIA DEVINE/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

## Gioia

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a hair dryer in one hand and a paintbrush in the other in order to have the surface completely dry by the time he's ready to start an image.

His days begin with no plans or sketches. After his morning walk with his dogs, he'll turn on his studio lights and start shuffling through piles of photography. Eventually he'll find an image that speaks to him. Depending on the size of the work, he can finish a painting in a few hours.

"I go fast now," says Gioia. "My paintings appear to be detailed but that is created with rapid flicks of the wrist with brushes I've fashioned out of worn-out ones. I move rapidly but it appears as though it was meticulous."

Though they come together quickly, Gioia admits that some of his best works are re-worked many times over a three- or four-year period. He will have a canvas hang around his studio for many years or hang in a gallery but then come back into his possession. Once he sees the painting again, he might alter a slight detail. At times, like with his portrait "Between Here and There," he might layer over it completely.

Gioia says he painted the original portrait for that piece 10 years ago. One day, he pulled it out and brushed a skull over top of the subject's face. He tried out a new technique, interlacing ribbons of light so they radiated outwards from the face. Gioia left the eyes human so the changing might suggest the passage of time. One of his favorite paintings in the show is "Presence."

"What I looked for were the landscapes that had a feeling of being haunted by a place, a time or a thing," describes Gioia. "Spirit to me is the thing that you sense, but you can't maybe see or touch. You feel it there. My paintings tend to be pretty literal but, to me, there was always a sneaky way to get a spiritual underpinning to something that looks very realistic."

The image in "Presence" feels like a trick of the light. An ordinary chair and lamp sit at the edge of a staircase, but the sunshine trickling in from the window gives the briefest glimmer of something more. "Remaining" was another re-worked landscape, where Gioia added ghostly residents to an abandoned house in the woods. Their shapes appear to shimmer in the autumn light.

For his "Art Talk Live," Gioia will paint a canvas in real-time. Those interested in



With his portrait "Between Here and There," Dean Gioia completely layered over an older painting. DEAN GIOIA/SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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**Dean Gioia**

joining the Zoom call must register on the Gadsden Arts Center's website.

Even after so many years, Gioia continually craves the engagement that the artistic process provides. He fully gives over to a more relaxed and unconscious state of mind when his hands, thoughts and eyes all work together. With this latest series, he hopes to offer viewers a similar reprieve.

"My job is to give you a place of rest," says Gioia. "To come away with a sense of the extraordinary beneath the ordinary. That our everyday world is more than it appears to be on the surface if you're paying attention and willing to go there."

*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](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*