



"Last Light" depicts the outdoors in Grayton Beach.

STEPHEN SMITH

TRUE COLORS

OUTDOORSMAN'S OPEN AIR PAINTINGS MAKE A SPLASH



Plein air painter Stephen Smith works outside in Grayton Beach.

STEPHEN SMITH

AMANDA SIERADZKI COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Artist Stephen Bennett Smith is always ready to ride the wave. He's an outdoorsman in love with Florida's beaches and oceans, which gave him many opportunities to swim and boat. He was an avid surfer in Long

Island, New York, and continued when his family relocated to Daytona. Music has always been another interest, learning the guitar and keyboard alongside his burgeoning interest in art at the age of 8.

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Smith

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Smith's plein air paintings are being shown among others as part of the Under Florida Skies exhibition at Picture Frames Unlimited. It's the second event with the Plein Air Tallahassee group and will run through Aug. 31.

Smith began drawing cartoons and cars via his father, an engineer who often left drafting materials like pencils and triangles within reach. In high school, he took inspiration from psychedelic posters and pop art and began sketching his own poster designs. Later, he graduated from the University of Florida in 1974 with a degree in fine art and painting, naming Hiram Williams as a significant mentor in his loose figurative work.

"Emotion is closely tied to my work," said Smith. "It's everything that really because without it there wouldn't be a real reason to paint. It's like improvising a piece of music or surfing where you're totally caught up in the moment, the movements, and the sound."

In his home studio, Smith, 63, continued on a more abstract painting path working on large-scale expressionistic portraits with bright, bold primary colors. He balances a day job at the Museum of Florida History as an exhibit designer, equally enjoying the speed of digital work and making computer illustrations for posters and interactive games. As a graphic designer for 43 years, he says his work has played a major role in his approach to a canvas.

Painting the moment

The same process he uses in commercial art is translated into his outdoor paintings. It's given him the chance to experiment with elements of color and composition, and ultimately find dynamism in landscape scenes. Smith will analyze each component of an image and find the most important piece that he wants to show and give priority to in order to get his idea across.

"Through being a designer, I've realized that sometimes simplicity is the best solution," says Smith. "I'm really trying to communicate visually and verbally by manipulating typography, but relating a message is also very important. With painting, it may just be how I feel about the moment or the scene that I'm viewing."

It was after reading "Fill Your Oil Paintings with Light & Color" by Kevin MacPherson that he discovered plein air art. The phrasing is borrowed from the French Impressionist painters to



"Jack of Hearts."

STEPHEN SMITH



mean in open air," and is a way for artists to work outdoors. Smith's passion for the natural world surrounding his Florida home came through in his own plein air work that he started in 2005.

Smith finds the memories hung on the walls of his home to be the most valuable aspect of plein air painting, keeping many rather than selling a record of the time spent on location. He's part of many plein air groups, and has participated in many "paint outs" in and around the Tallahassee area, where Smith gives credit to organizer Lorraine Clark who secured locations like Mill Stone Plantation. The largest was in Apalachicola, which was a conference of about 200 painters, followed by his first workshop in New Mexico with MacPherson.

"It was a great adventure," recalls Smith. "The value of plein air paintings is just having a permanent memory of what you did that day and they almost become like friends to you. They're your accomplishments and you look at them and say, 'I remember what it was like that day, and I remember what New Mexico light and the sky was like.'"

Color and texture

In Smith's typical plein air set-up he uses an umbrella to keep the sunlight off an image and the palette to avoid being blinded by the intensity of the natural light. He prefers to stand as he works to allow for free movement and the moments where he needs to step back and evaluate what a painting needs next. He enjoys this physicality combined

with the challenges that the outdoors poses such as insects and changing weather.

He describes his plein air style as loose and painterly, with aims of painting spontaneously versus the realist approach. Smith interprets the landscape through accessing emotions, allowing his passion for painting to be conveyed in an image in order to determine the overall feeling of a piece. Capturing life in the seemingly inanimate is achieved through his brushwork, making the mark of the artist obvious instead of trying to hide it with a blending brush.

"I'm not interested in creating an illusion," describes Smith. "I'm more interested in creating an object and I want the paint to be very important to the whole finished piece. I don't want to hide the paint by blending carefully, and instead I like to show the paint on the surface."

When traveling to locations, he carries four colors and uses a limited palette. Smith says using less not only makes it more portable, but mix-

IF YOU GO

What: Under Florida Skies, member exhibition of Plein Air Tallahassee
When: 9 a.m.-6 p.m., through Aug. 31

Where: Picture Frames Unlimited, 2774 Capital Circle NE

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-422-0088 or visit pictureframesunlimited.com/Exhibitions.html.

ing fewer colors creates greater harmony on the canvas. Texture is another important aspect and he uses a palette knife more than a brush to apply thicker paint, giving a more dramatic effect to the surface of his work.

Going on safari

Water is a continuous theme and often the centerpiece for his outdoor works, which he tries to complete in three to four-hour sittings. He enjoys traveling far and wide, from Monterey, California, to St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge for picturesque beach scenes. He recently caught some sun and surf in Waikiki, Hawaii and wants to return to paint its landscape. One of his more memorable local trips around Florida was to Western Lake where a particularly stunning sunset captured his imagination with a direct view from where he was camping.

"It's really like going on safari where you're on the hunt and you want to come back with a good painting," says Smith. "Being outdoors gives you inspiration that you can't get in the studio when you're trying to render or reproduce what you see from nature. Painting from life also gives you true colors

and you can see detail in the shadows."

In the past, he's shown his work as part of the South of Soho Cooperative Art Gallery in Railroad Square and hosted several one-man shows around town. Most recently, the piece, "Sunset over Western Lake," is currently being shown among others as part of the Under Florida Skies exhibition at Picture Frames Unlimited. It's the second event with the Plein Air Tallahassee group and will run through Aug. 31. Smith enjoys the camaraderie of the group, where the intensity and energy of being surrounded by other artists fuels what can sometimes be a solitary experience.

Even after a somewhat quiet "paint out," where some are zoned into their work and others walk around to critique and socialize, Smith can feel exhausted after three hours of concentration. He's looking forward to retirement where he can immerse himself more into his artwork, both abstract and plein air, and remarks on how mental attitude plays a big part in the entire process. However, painting brings him to his happy place always, and he is most at peace under the sun or in his studio, and with a brush in his hand.

"Some people are great at talking about art," muses Smith. "But for me, it's all about doing it and seeing it. Paintings communicate by themselves, or if not, they create a mystery that intrigues."

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).

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