

ART Dreamy landscapes meander through memory

By **BILL VAN SICLEN**
JOURNAL ARTS WRITER

ATTLEBORO, Mass. — To art lovers around New England and beyond, Andrew Nixon is known mainly as a painter of dreamy, light-filled landscapes — works that have earned him comparisons with 19th-century masters such as Thomas Cole and Martin Johnson Heade. So, naturally you'd expect him to spend most of his time in some quaint little town or village, far from the nearest city.

Yet as it turns out, Nixon, whose work is the focus of a new exhibit at the Newport Art Museum, isn't as far off the grid as one might think. Indeed, for the past few years, he's rented a studio on County Street, a busy boulevard that leads directly into Attleboro's small but bustling downtown.

Among his neighbors: a pizza parlor and a tai chi studio.

"This is my home away from home," Nixon says as he welcomes a visitor to his cozy brick-walled space. "It's not much to look at, but it works for me."

Scattered around the studio are some of the prints, paintings and other artworks that Nixon plans to include in his Newport show. Among them are two recent landscapes — "The Little Hill," a scene of trees and hills outlined against a powder-blue sky, and "Five Trees in France," a close-up of gnarly-limbed poplar trees that deliberately recalls the work of another landscape specialist: Claude Monet.

Stylistically, both paintings are typical of Nixon's work.

The pastoral scene in "The Little Hill," for example, is based on an actual place — a small ski area near Cumberland's Diamond Hill Park. Yet the way it's painted, with everything from trees and clouds to the ski run itself rendered in the same soft-edged, pastel-tinged style, transforms it into something dream-like, even a little surreal.

The same is true of "Five Trees in France." Though Nixon, who travels frequently in France, based the painting on a real-life scene, the result doesn't have the you-are-there immediacy of a photograph. Instead, the trees have a slightly otherworldly look — like something out of a medieval tapestry or illuminated manuscript.

In a recent essay, art historian and Holy Cross professor Joanna E. Ziegler described Nixon's paintings as having "a near-silent stillness" that evokes "the tranquility of the open field." Others have used words such as "peaceful," "haunting" and "contemplative" to describe his work.

And how does Nixon himself describe his paintings?

"Actually, I'm very happy when people talk about my work in those terms," he says. "While most of my paintings are inspired by actual scenes and places, they're not intended to be exact copies of reality. They're designed to evoke a mood or a memory rather than a specific place."

Certainly, Nixon's work has been a hit with art lovers, both here and abroad. An exhibition list posted on his website (andrewnixon.net) shows dozens of entries, including shows at the Tollbooth Art Center in Scotland and the Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art in France. Locally, he's represented by the Beverly Pepper Gallery in Boston and Cade Tompkins Projects in Providence.

It comes as a surprise, then, to learn that Nixon nearly gave up painting, convinced that he didn't have the skills to become a professional artist.

A native Rhode Islander (he was born in



"Oxbow" by Andrew Nixon demonstrates aspects of the painter's work that critics have described as "peaceful," "haunting" and "contemplative."

"Andrew Nixon: I'm Here and You Are Not"

runs through March 11 at the Newport Art Museum, 76 Bellevue Ave. Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 10-4 and Sunday noon-4. Admission: adults \$10, seniors \$8, students with I.D. \$6, and five and under free. Contact: (401) 848-8200 or newportartmuseum.org.

"Everyman at the Quarterpole" by Andrew Nixon.

His work has been a hit with art lovers both here and abroad, but it wasn't until he was in his mid-30s that Nixon began believing in himself as a painter.



Woonsocket in 1959), Nixon grew up taking art lessons from Robert Lamb, a noted local painter and sculptor. Later, he earned a bachelor's degree in sculpture from Boston University and a master's (also in sculpture) from Indiana University.

Yet it wasn't until he was in his mid-30s that Nixon finally began believing in himself as a painter.

"There was a time, in my early 20s, when I was convinced that I had absolutely no talent," he says. "I couldn't draw. I couldn't paint. It was awful."

The turning point came in 1996, when Nixon was invited to teach a summer course at the Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art in Pont Aven, France. Located in Brittany, on the northwest coast of France, Pont Aven has been a favorite spot for artists at least since the 19th century. (Perhaps the area's most famous visitor was Paul Gauguin, who made frequent trips to Pont Aven in 1880s and 1890s.)

At first, Nixon says, Brittany's picturesque fields and towns were "almost too pretty to paint." Eventually, however, he devised a formula that seemed to work: rather than painting directly from nature, he began working from memory, a process that often forced him to simplify his compositions and

strip away extraneous details. It's an approach he's followed ever since.

"One of the things I've learned is that most artists, even the really good ones, have limitations," he says. "The trick is finding a way to overcome those limitations."

A member of the fine arts faculty at UMass-Dartmouth, Nixon often shares stories of his youthful struggles with his

students. "It's something everybody can relate to," he says. Though he's best known for his landscapes, Nixon has some surprises in store for his Newport show. One is a new series of prints inspired by Google Earth, the Internet-based "virtual map" that can instantly whisk viewers to almost any point on the planet. Nixon says the new technology represents "both a challenge and an opportunity" for artists to rethink the way they approach landscape.

Another surprise: a painting inspired by "Moby-Dick," the classic Melville tale about a white whale with a serious attitude problem.

"Basically, I've been wanting to do a Moby-Dick painting for years," he says. "Technically, it's a challenge because you have this very surreal scene — a giant white whale erupting from the water — and you have to make it look real. But there's also a challenge on a more basic level. After all, what New Englander doesn't already have an image of Moby-Dick floating around in his or her head?"

bvansic@providencejournal.com
(401) 277-7421

AN EVENING WITH

Renée Fleming

AND THE RHODE ISLAND PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Larry Rachleff, Conductor

A spectacular evening not to be missed!

