

What Dreams May Come

BY RICK FOSTER SUN CHRONICLE STAFF | Posted: Friday, March 15, 2013 11:30 pm

ATTLEBORO -- Possibly, painter Andrew Nixon sees the world the same way most people do.

But in his art, the world glimmers like a dream or the memory of a long-ago event that might or might not have happened. A family gathers lakeside somewhere in the hazy, idyllic past. A jockey rides past the quarter pole on a frothing mount, but appears to be reading the Daily Racing Form.

It might not be reality as most people know it, but Andrew Nixon's vision represents the essence of places and things remembered - the emotional truth, not a photographic likeness.

Nixon, 53, teaches drawing at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, but spends most of his time creating in a well-lit studio space in an old factory building on County Street.

Little known in his hometown, his creations have won an appreciative following among the art gallery intelligentsia and have been widely exhibited in the United States and Europe. He's also earned impressive reviews from events like last year's solo exhibition at the Newport Art Museum.

Fascinated by 20th century painter Balthus, who favored the dreamy side in his paintings, and Edward Muybridge, whose photographic motion studies helped pave the way for the movies, the city artist had an epiphany while teaching drawing in France in the 1990s.

"I had a lot of time, so I spend hours drawing in the field," he said. "But the drawings were terrible, which was frustrating because I was in such a beautiful place."

When he returned to the studio at night, he began drawing and painting the same scenes from memory. Imaginings and atmosphere crept in, leavened by nostalgia.

Soon, Nixon was creating monotypes that took on the qualities of a dream state. To his surprise, the dream-paintings aroused an excited response.

"The monotypes and the paintings started selling," he said, "and that's where my career really started."

Nixon recently wrapped up a major exhibition at the Newport Art Museum, and will follow that up with another show beginning in November at Cade Tompkins Gallery in Providence.

Some of Nixon's earliest memories involve drawing pictures in front of the TV as a child, and he remembers thinking it would be a missed chance if he didn't go to art school.

He began studying figure drawing at a young age with Rhode Island artists Myrna and Robert Lamb. Later he went on to earn degrees from Boston University and Indiana University.

Even to those in the know, Nixon's style isn't easy to describe.

"He inhabits a place between reality and the surreal, but he doesn't belong to one school or the other," said Cade Tompkins, whose gallery will be exhibiting Nixon this fall. "His work is completely open to the interpretation of the viewer."

Nixon's paintings seem rooted in reality, if filtered through whimsy. But it's a reality delimited by his imagination. Which is to say, his reality is unlimited.

Look around his loft-style studio and you'll see everything from totally realistic landscape paintings to dreamscapes that seem to float outward from a semiconscious mind.

High on a wall, between two arched windows, hangs a painting of a fire on the upper story of an old textile mill in Providence. It's the mill where Nixon used to paint. The flames are coming from his studio. True story.

"The title of the painting is "My Bad Day," he says. "It was."

On other walls, there are drawings of elephants, landscapes, a kicking mule. Nixon holds up a triptych of a white cat caught in various stages of movement as it races across the canvas. It's a tribute to Muybridge, whose work prefigured Thomas Edison's motion picture experiments.

Nixon recognizes there's a certain irony in revisiting Muybridge's motion studies at a time when technology can effortlessly analyze, play back and even resequence the motions of a cat or a quarterback. But Nixon points out that the canvas offers a different perspective.

"It is," he says, "because it's possible."

More information about Andrew Nixon and examples of his art can be found at www.andrewnixon.net