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By Gary Schwan, Art Critic— Jupiter Artist's Beach People Mix Realism with Mystery, So The Viewer Asks 'Why?'

Jupiter painter and art teacher Dennis Aufiery can offer his students two tips on life: Attend lectures, and be nice to guys living down the street who own cool jeeps with Maine license plates.

While a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in the '60s, Aufiery showed up for a lecture by Fairfield Porter, a stubborn figurative painter at a time when abstract and experimental art still ruled.

"The entire audience was me, a cleaning lady, and some guy asleep," Aufiery recalled. "So Porter said, 'Since nobody's here, why don't we just talk?' He inspired me to get the varnish off figurative painting - the brown varnish of the old masters - and put it in contemporary terms."

But Aufiery was still working at the task after graduation when he noticed that a neighbor in Philadelphia had a nifty Maine jeep. Curious, he struck up a conversation. The neighbor turned out to be the respected realist painter Neil Welliver, who happened to be doing a teaching stint at the University of Pennsylvania. "He wanted to see some of my paintings, and then he urged me to apply to Penn," Aufiery said. Not only did he get into a Penn graduate school loaded with talented teachers, but Welliver eventually arranged a scholarship for him.



PHOTO BY BRUCE R. BENNETT

And Aufiery got the "brown varnish" off his paintings. Evidence can be found in an exhibition of his figurative paintings and drawings at the Court House Cultural Center in Stuart through May 13. (He is also represented by Donna Tribby Fine Art in West Palm Beach's CityPlace.)

Whether portraits of nude models, or narrative paintings of crowded beaches in Miami and Cuba, Aufiery's images have an air of mystery about them. The viewer asks "Why?"

Why is a nude woman holding a shovel, of all things, as if it were a vacuum cleaner? Why are two guys at a beach looking at a woman showering off the sand after a swim, while a dude in a fancy pink pimp suit stands nearby, gazing elsewhere? Or is he just an innocent Cubano who happens to wear suits to the beach?

"I like open narrative," Aufiery said. "I like the idea of getting lost in a picture. I'd like viewers to wonder what is really happening, and then maybe find themselves feeling guilty of something."



BALSEROS, 80 X 65, 1997

Artist Bruce Helander, the program planner at West Palm Beach's ArmoryArt Center, where Aufiery also teaches, says the painter creates "a wonderful visual poetry" in his beach people.

"They look like they're about to discuss an important topic, or whisper a secret about somebody walking by. Dennis is able to put this sense of uncertainty and intrigue into his bag of visual tricks."

Aufiery, 58, moved to Jupiter in 1999 with his wife Carol and began teaching at the Armory almost right away. His varied career has included designing sets for his brother's theater company, and creating murals for the noted pioneer of postmodernist architecture, Robert Venturi. He worked for more than two years with The Repertory Company in downtown Philadelphia. "We did Mamet, Stoppard, the good stuff," he recalled. "I become completely absorbed in set design, and got fairly well known for it."

Far from being a detour, set design helped his paintings. "In set design, you realize that painting can be theater, and can still be presented in such a way as to be convincing. You have to present images in a more conceptual way." A chance encounter led to his being hired by Venturi. He became "color consultant" for a large show of 20th-century design the architect organized for New York's Whitney Museum of Art. "He'd say to me, 'Make that wall look like sound,' Aufiery laughed. 'I'd say, 'toxic green.' He'd say, 'Perfect.' It was all pretty funny."

Later, Aufiery did a number of mural projects for Venturi, including a major work for the architect's TreeHouse at the Philadelphia Zoo. The artist lived for a time at the edge of the Florida Everglades in order to sketch the flora and fauna. All in all, the Venturi collaboration was a success. "When you get to work with people with strong opinions, you realize you have to have strong opinions, too, and defend them."



TROPICAL SHOWER, 30 X 26, 1994

Aufiery thinks drawing is an essential part of artmaking. "It's the beginning of being able to conceptualize," he said. Several pencil drawings in the Stuart show depict submerged vintage cars, with fish floating by. They mix fantasy and realism in the service of metaphor. The idea popped to mind after a stint painting in Cuba, where he photographed the ancient automobiles still chugging the streets. "I

visited the Baltimore Aquarium, and then I suddenly realized my time in Cuba was like visiting the lost continent of Atlantis. Everything down there is on hold, submerged, under water." In other words, mysterious