

Documenting Mother Nature's Beauty: 'Obsessive Realism' on Display at Five Points Gallery

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By John Fitts

Photo by John Fitts Budding artist and 2013 Torrington High School graduate Phillip Tanner with his former teacher Victor Leger.

As a painter, Victor Leger can find a wealth of subject matter right outside his door. The woods behind his house, the field across the street, and nearby Lake Winchester alone offer a wealth of material, especially when one is patient enough to let the sun create a wealth of textures.

“It never gets old looking out the window here,” he said. “I see the seasons change week to week.”

Leger, of course, certainly ventures outside of his neighborhood to paint. The Maine coastline is one favorite locale, but Litchfield County is certainly the source for much of his inspiration.

“I live in a beautiful place,” Leger added. “I have a lifetime of potential.”

Wherever he goes, Leger paints the majority of his work - approximately 90 percent - on location or en plein air -- faithfully, yet creatively document what Mother Nature has to offer.

As alluded to in “Obsessive Realism,” his current show at Five Points Gallery in Torrington, Leger is passionate about using oil and panels to document mother nature’s beauty.

“I like to paint pretty much what I see in front of me,” Leger said.

And obsessive captures so much of Leger’s spirit.

Leger is an award-winning and widely exhibited artist and has been represented by The White Gallery in Lakeville and the Cooley Gallery in Old Lyme. He said

he's honored to exhibit at Five Points, a gallery that attracts national and international artists.

At a recent opening for the Five Points show, Jeff Sesko, an art teacher at Explorations Charter School in Winsted, was struck by the work, including one of Leger's latest tree portraits.

The piece was so "real," yet somehow originally expressive, Sesko said.

"It's just so captivating," Sesko said. "It's accurate, but it's not photo realistic. He's made it more."

While Leger has mastered the landscape enough to be a widely exhibited and award-winning artist, early work was figurative in nature, something he labels as "post-modern collage painting."

"My objective in that body of work was addressing in visual form, the distance that we as a conscious species have traveled in 75,000 years, and where we may be heading in the future," he said. "In hindsight it seems a pretty heady goal, something a young and idealistic person loves taking on."

After working in that vein for a bit more than a decade, primarily in the 1980s, the landscape began appearing in the work. At first it was part of a bigger picture and gradually became more prominent.

"The landscape element was getting large and larger," he said.

In the 1990s, he returned briefly to the more abstract art.

"I felt I hadn't finished what I needed to say about them," he said.

But after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, Leger's outlook further evolved. He still feels that art designed to shock and awe has its place but is more interested in the calming nature of life's beauty.

"The landscape always makes people feel terrific," he said. "That's important to me. There's a lot of need and anxiety in the world. We don't need to add to it."

"I have these brief moments, more and more over the years of total elation to the

point of emotional overload while looking at beautiful light in nature,” Leger said. “Lately I have been trying to imagine how to use this inspiration to create an Elysian world, something of such hope and beauty that it would inspire everyone to reach for their better angels.”

Leger’s ability to inspire goes beyond his paintings. He’s been an educator since 1994, teaching in four districts. Since 2000, Leger has taught art at Torrington High School.

“I love it here,” he said.

The students have their moments, but Leger loves their excitement and zeal for life.

“I find it frustrating but at the same time they can be so funny, so relaxed about life, so idealistic,” he said.

And Leger regularly sees graduates who tell him how much they loved art class. But he also knows the nature of the subject resonates well with kids, who feel it offers a chance to express themselves.

“I have an advantage over a lot of other disciplines that way,” he said.

Budding graphic artist Phillip Tanner graduated from Torrington High in 2013 and took classes and participated in art club with Leger. He was one of numerous students who came to the recent opening for the show at Five Points gallery.

“He’s the best,” Tanner said of Leger. “He really knows how to inspire a lot of people.”

Leger, in turn, was inspired by his teachers, starting in kindergarten. It was the mid-1960s at Lady of Sorrows in Hartford. The teacher had students cut out paper animals for a circus train display. Leger remembers drawing an extended trunk that didn’t quite fit the train car, but his teacher held up that animal for the class to see.

“Look, boys and girls. Look what Victor did,” Leger remembers her saying. “That’s a nice-looking elephant.”

“I was surprised,” he said. “I remember thinking maybe I could do something like this.”

As he went on to attend public schools in Hartford, he remembers two other teachers who inspired him greatly, including Mike Somma at Hartford High School and Peter Waite, with whom he studied through a collaborative program with the Wadsworth Atheneum.

One suggested he go to art school.

“I didn’t even know they existed,” he said.

So while the family had little money, Leger did just that, first attending Pratt Institute in Brooklyn with a full scholarship. He later transferred and in 1984 obtained a bachelor of fine arts from San Francisco Art Institute.

After graduating, Leger practiced his art but for several years worked with his brother Paul, owner of Lee and Sons Woodworking. The woodworking background has helped immensely in his life and career, from building the home where he and his wife, MaryPat, live to crafting his own panels, on which the majority of his painting is done, he said.

After leaving that career, Leger returned to school, obtaining a teaching degree at Central Connecticut State University and has taught since 1994.

Leger’s wife is also an educator and a fabric artist. Their careers offer the chance to spend time away, especially in the summer. For about seven weeks, they’ve spent a week in Maine in the area of Acadia National Park’s Schoodic Peninsula.

This past summer, both Victor and MaryPat were afforded the luxury of serving as artists in residence for the National Park Service, spending three weeks there. It inspired them to buy a 150-square-foot place of their own, he said.

“Having the luxury of longer periods of time forced our hand,” he said.

Leger is looking forward to spending a little more time in Birch Harbor, both a fishing hamlet and artistic enclave.

“It’s an amazing welcoming community,” he said.

But the Legers, who have three children, have also been blessed to live in this beautiful area. Victor Leger loves the combination of teaching and creating his own work. In some form, he works on his art every day. He doesn't need to luxury of the summer to create, he said. Even in the middle of the winter, he often paints, using the comfort of his home or studio, or the back of his van to shelter from the elements.

"Every day is a blessing," he said. "I have a great job that affords me time to do this."

Obsessive Realism is one of three exhibits on display at Five Points Gallery, 33 Main St., Torrington, through Dec. 26. A free artist conversation will take place on Friday, Dec. 11 from 6 to 7 p.m. Gallery hours are Thursday through Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m.

See more about the artist at <http://www.victorleger.com/>