



Artist Tom Stephens takes his visions of life at sea and translates them onto the canvas. Stephens is a charter-boat captain who attended the Ringling College of Art and Design.

# ‘PROCESS IS FINE ART PARAMOUNT’

by David Wyant | Contributing Writer

Artist Tom Stephens shares his visions of aquatic imagery.

Tom Stephens spends his mornings mesmerized by the endless horizon of the open gulf. As a charter-boat captain, the aquatic environment becomes second nature — a way to begin the day. Stephens will tell you that the little subtleties — such as a snook staring him in the eye — are what give the familiar experience the variety he craves.

Stephens calls these instantaneous memories “the little things, the Zen-type moments,” and they are essential to his off-the-water life as a contemporary artist. Stephens

makes it clear that he does not attempt to recreate the scenes he observes on the water. In fact, reproduction does not interest the artist. Stephens merely consumes the endless horizon on his own — without reason. If his paintings evoke particular aquatic imagery, it comes from within.

In a 1950 interview, the renegade abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock said:

“All cultures have had means and techniques of expressing their immediate aims — the Chinese, the

Renaissance, all cultures. The thing that interests me is that today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within.”

Pollock’s view of modern art — that it is less constrained than former periodic expressions of time and culture — is the very attitude that Stephens embraces. For instance, one cannot escape religious iconography on a stroll through the Ringling Museum of Art’s Renaissance and Baroque collections. In

the canon of painting, time and culture are often inextricable from the work. As did Pollock, Stephens thrives in the liberal template of today’s contemporary period.

Though contemporary art may seem progressive to the layperson, Stephens looks at current magazines such as *Art in America* and recognizes similarities in virtually all of the featured works. He does not want to say the same for his own work. “I try to stay uninfluenced because it makes (the art) more unique and true,” Stephens said.

Born and raised in the Tallahassee area, Stephens moved to Sarasota to attend Ringling College of Art and Design in 1993, at the age of 25. Because he had completed his academic requirements, Stephens was able to devote his attention to artistic pursuits.

He quickly surrounded himself with peers that were just as aggressive about forging an identity in the art world.

“When I went to Ringling, I expected that it was going to be a situation where I would have to keep up with these people,” Stephens said. “But I found that there were only a handful (of students) as fired up as I was.” Stephens attributes

this phenomenon to the fact that he was a 25-year-old freshman and many of his classmates were just out of high school.

Stephens quickly took to the paint and credits the late Leslie Lerner as his greatest faculty influence. Stephens spent most of his time in a small studio space on campus, where he began to develop his own style. Though he currently lives very close to the Ringling campus, Stephens still misses the constant critiques that he received from faculty and peers.

What is the Tom Stephens style? Though Stephens’ work ranges from total abstraction to landscape, this method is what he describes as the essence of his work:

“Laboring over getting a straight line is not what felt comfortable to me,” Stephens said. “Process is paramount.”

The entire process takes place in the studio that Stephens built on the side of his home, and it is dictated by his energy level. High-energy days are more productive, but such days are few for a captain who spends about 200 mornings a year on the Gulf of Mexico.

The process begins with Stephens building his own stretchers and setting up the canvases.



Stephens uses these art instruments to produce his aquatic imagery.

For this reason, you’ll find wood pieces and shavings scattered alongside globs of paint on the floor and walls of his art space.

Stephens works on several paintings at once, and uses an all-over technique — his marks are not concentrated in any one particular place on a canvas.

“It is all about the energy of the mark-making and working the entire canvas at once,” Stephens said. “I see instant results the way that I paint.”

This expressionistic way of approaching the canvas is evident in the saturated nature of his finished works. Even the artist describes many as “overworked.”

Although expression is important, it is Stephens’ use of color that makes his work so appealing to the eye. Stephens knows that a painting is finished if it contains the “full-range of color” that defines his personal vision.

“I can look at (the painting) and tell which color comes next,” Stephens said. “Sometimes you can add two little dashes of orange to something that is too blue, and then it is done.”

A finished canvas does not end the process, because Stephens frames every work himself with a wood frame cut in his back yard. Instead of installing a wire on the back of his works for hanging, Ste-

phens suggests that the work fit snug to the wall by placing it on a couple of nails. Stephens is so particular about his narrow aesthetic — down to the hanging — that when he views works in a museum setting, he examines how the entire work is put together. “I look at how the painting is built — if it is straight and whether the canvas is warped,” Stephens said.

Look at a Tom Stephens original, and you will see an object built completely from bare material in his home studio. Every staple, color and mark is conspicuously placed. The finished product reflects meticulous attention and a specific vision. The vision is not literal, but instead the product of continuous experience and the physical process of creation.

When Stephens takes a look at his own work, it becomes clear that he’s streamlined the aesthetic niche that he began at Ringling College 15 years ago.

Stephens believes that he has reached the point at which his art is ready to emerge from his home on a more voluminous scale. He envisions exhibits in a couple of galleries and a larger studio in a new home.

“First impressions occur only once,” Stephens said. “I want to make sure that the timing is right.”



Stephens is inspired by 1950s artist Jackson Pollock.