

Mike McConnell's Extraordinary World of Exploration, Whimsy and Wonder

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By Alex Kasten, Special to the Global Media Center

When you walk into the newest exhibit at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) Arts Program Gallery, the first thing that may strike you is the vibrant colors and curious images of a diptych, in which two figures, holding chainsaws, stand in the foreground of a makeshift outdoor workspace.

One figure—with a cigarette in one hand and a saw in the other—rests on a block of wood, as if contemplating his first cut. The other, wearing headphones, methodically sculpts and we can see the image of a bear emerge from the wood. Far in the background, an adult bear and its cub appear to be observing the entire operation with wide eyes, almost as if they just stepped into a strange new world.



The piece, “Bear Carver” (2015), among 42 paintings, illustrations and three-dimensional constructions in the exhibition “Mike McConnell: Cutting into Art,” on view through Feb. 18, welcomes viewers into McConnell’s universe, where everyday activities, people and objects intersect with the natural world.

“Bear Carver” received the President’s Best of Show award at the *Third Biennial Maryland Regional Juried Art Exhibition*, co-

sponsored by UMUC. A one-person exhibition is the award bestowed upon the Best in Show recipient.

McConnell’s work invites exploration; the closer you look, the more you discover. In “The Pole Dancers Are Not What They Seem” (2014), two women, presumably the dancers in the title, fish tranquilly in a pond. But, upon closer inspection, we’re left to wonder . . . Why does one of the trees have strange markings? Or, why is a copy of a “New Yorker” magazine in the painting’s foreground? Or, why does an owl sitting in a tree seem to take on the appearance of a piece of machinery?

Musing on the exploratory nature of his work, McConnell said, “Today, people view art through their phone or computer screen, so it’s really important for me to get them in front of my work.” A show like the one on exhibit at UMUC allows viewers to see all of the small places and special things that occupy McConnell’s thoughts and expressions.



The works in the exhibition are propelled by life experiences and how they intertwine with nature, McConnell stated in his exhibit-catalog commentary. But, it is his use of contrasting color, bright shapes and visual non-sequiturs that is so striking as vibrant blues, reds, oranges and greens play off of each other in paintings that appear to be collages of intermingling stories, themes and visual idiosyncrasies.

McConnell’s style reflects his formal training in printmaking and illustration at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) where he graduated in 1975 and derives also from his gift for narrative and humor, which he honed over the course of his 30-plus year career as a professional illustrator and graphic designer.

“A lot of what I do with my art is to work abstractly, but also my illustration background comes through,” said McConnell.

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"I don't start these things trying to tell a story, but eventually something comes to me that propels the piece, which makes it more interesting for the viewer."

UMUC Arts Program Curator Jon West-Bey said he was particularly struck by McConnell's playful nature. "There's an enjoyable story behind everything Mike does," he said. "With his work, the colors and experiences come through in such a way that you feel like you're there."

McConnell delights in celebrating his many influences. In some pieces, you may sense the presence of Henri Matisse, Richard Diebenkorn, and other past and present masters of color and shape. In other pieces, McConnell directly references the styles of David Hockney, Grayson Perry and Jeff Koons. In "Another Hockney Shower" (2015), "Popping Koons" (2013), and "Grayson's Ashes" (2014), McConnell pays homage to these greats with fun-loving exuberance.

As Eric Key, director of the Arts Program at UMUC noted in the show's catalog: "Each piece acts as a magnet to the human eye, drawing the viewer in to see what is hidden or to impose his or her own experiences onto it."

Entering McConnell's world is a truly fulfilling experience.

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