

Wednesday, December 12, 2007

East Lansing painter makes magic with science and art

by Mary C. Cusack

East Lansing artist Robert Moses stands with his painting "Hot Seat" on exhibit at East Lansing Public Art Gallery through Jan. 3. Moses' works perfectly demonstrate how when a brush-wielding alchemist combines the science of light and color with the design principles of concept and composition, magic bursts from the canvas with the hypnotic power of the aurora borealis. This is big-city stuff.



In fact, Moses originally hails from a big city, having spent most of his 56 years in San Diego. East Lansing was fortunate to inherit Moses five years ago when his wife, Sandra Logan, took a position at Michigan State University. The couple decided that the move offered Moses the opportunity to make a go at painting fulltime.

Moses was educated as a scientist, earning a bachelor's in microbiology and a master's in astronomy. It was only 10 years ago that he sought professional training as an artist, although he had always been involved in creating art. He credits part of his desire and skill to his mother, who practiced the nearly lost art of photograph retouching.

"She was a beautiful colorist," Moses says. "I used to love watching her do the coloring of the faces. She had a beautiful eye for skin tones," a talent obviously passed on to Moses.

The artist's bold, energetic brushstrokes indicate a confident looseness, seemingly the opposite of the meticulous photo retouching process that

fascinated him as a boy. In reality, Moses follows a process every bit as rigorous to bring his creations to life and light. There is careful planning, experimenting and logging of results long before the brush impacts the canvas.

After developing his basic concept and design on canvas, Moses then uses the technology of Photoshop to play with color schemes and compositional elements. “It takes a long time for me to develop compositions that I'm excited about, but when I start painting it's very dynamic,” he explains.

Moses cites Francisco Goya and Francis Bacon as strong influences. Indeed, his work does combine Goya's mastery of light with the frenetic vibe of Bacon's work. “Luminosity and energetic brush strokes are very much a part of what I'm after,” Moses summarizes. The macabre nature of both of the masters' work is intrinsic as well.

A piece that received quite a bit of interest at the exhibit's opening is “Hot Seat,” one of the few object-oriented works in the exhibit. Influenced by Andy Warhol's “Electric Chair” series, the work turns a bright green wooden chair into something slightly unsettling, the vibrant colors and pictorial elements belying the sinister nature of an otherwise innocuous object.

As if caught on glowing green surveillance cameras, the “Figures in Motion” series features two abstract figures poised on the verge of some potential act of violence. Hung in alignment, the works suggest a graphic novel style narrative. The order of the works is fluid, but no matter which piece is placed last, the outcome doesn't seem to suggest a happy ending.

The bright pieces are more accessible, but it is the works featuring low light and a dark palette that attract the viewer. The limited lighting and the earthy color palette evoke a feeling of an early industrial age. The series “Ideal Forms,” which features plain folk transfixed by improbably suspended, colorfully glowing geometrical objects, is reminiscent of the motion picture “The Prestige.”

Like a true archimage, Moses continues to work on his science and magic. “My intention is to not have things fixed, but keep discovering what I might do that

empowers the work and use those tools to say something interesting and thought-provoking with emotional impact,” he says.

'Social And Cultural Expressionism'

The works of Robert Moses

Through Jan. 3

East Lansing Public Art Gallery