

MIDLANDS SECTION

A LOVE OF COLOR

BY DEENA C. BOUKNIGHT





Carolina © Brian Rutenberg. Courtesy of Forum Gallery, NYC, NY

ARTIST BRIAN RUTENBERG

He has been living in New York since 1987, but his heart is always in South Carolina. His home state, in fact, continues to be inspiration for his massive canvases featuring abstract landscapes. Brian Rutenberg grew up in the Lowcountry, exploring the coast where the rivers merge with the ocean. “There was a solitary and quiet magic in those places which struck deep chords in me,” he says. “I still feel them when I paint.”

Rutenberg has always painted. He said he has known he wanted to be a painter since he was in the second grade. “This has been my career, to paint professionally,” he says. “And I love what I do. I say a prayer of thanks every morning.”

After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree from the College of Charleston, Rutenberg received his Masters of Fine Art in 1989 from the School of Visual Arts in New York. That same year, his work was on display in the Francis Marion College Art Gallery in Florence. Since then, his paintings have been exhibited in galleries and art museums nationwide. However, the State Museum’s current exhibit represents a high point in Rutenberg’s career, both professionally and personally.

“I feel very honored,” says Rutenberg.

At an April 28 reception, he was on hand speak to art students, collectors, and enthusiasts alike about his inspiration – the state where his family still resides and where he plans to return someday. The names of his paintings reflect his connection with his native land: “Palmetto,” “Carolina Gold,” “Spring Island,” “Carolina Study,” “Santee” and “Waccamaw.”

Paul Matheny, chief curator of art at the State Museum, said he ran across images of Rutenberg’s paintings in a file while researching the work of an earlier abstract artist, J. Bardin.

“I had never seen Rutenberg’s paintings before, yet there was something inherently familiar about them,” he says. “This work reflected a certain transcendental abstraction through the beauty of nature, incorporating the qualities of landscape and the liquid presence of water. He is not interested in realistically portraying nature. His use of abstraction conveys the essence of the coastal and tidal landscape he grew up around, and places he visited, including Canada and Ireland. He captures an essence, a mood, and the atmosphere of these places.”

Within a few months of learning about Rutenberg, Matheny received a telephone call from the University of South Carolina. Jodi Salter, student services director for the art department at USC, was calling to discuss an upcoming project planned as part of



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the Atelier, an artist residency program. Familiar with the program, Matheny was excited to hear Rutenberg would be program's third artist.

After nearly two years of planning, research, and coordinating efforts with other museums, as well as galleries and private collectors, the State Museum presents 58 of Rutenberg's oil on canvas paintings and 12 drawings in an

exhibition entitled "Brinimming Tides." Showing is a representation of 15 years of work by Rutenberg, from his early 1991 "River Painting" series to 2006 with "Pale River," a 13' by 6' painting from the Carolina series painted specifically for this exhibition.

A show-within-the-show is the presentation of art that Rutenberg completed during his three visits to USC as the artist in residence. While at USC, Rutenberg worked with the art department regarding various printing techniques. Salter says she was thrilled to bring Rutenberg to USC, adding it was "incredible" to work with the artist. "The color just grabs you, and some of the paint is two inches thick in some

areas. The drawings are also incredible. He's a great talent, and you love his work even more after you meet him."

Rutenberg said he never made a conscious decision to paint abstractly. And, curiously, he does not consider himself an abstract expressionist, but instead a contemporary American artist who uses abstraction to render the invisible, visible. He believes that an eye, not told what to see, sees more.

Says Mark Sloan, director and senior curator of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston, "His unconventional use of color and texture create a surface tension drawing attention to the translucence and/or opacity of the painting. Some of these works seem to literally glow from an inner light source, while others allow for immersion in the mysteries of their depth."

But, as Rutenberg told Sloan, "One doesn't need to explain it, only enjoy it."

Those visiting the State Museum can enjoy Rutenberg's art in the Lipscomb Gallery through September 4, 2006. *SCM*

