

A Memory And A Memorial

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Mark Sloan & Loren Bridges

Brian Rutenberg presents oil painting “Cherry Grove IV” as gift to honor the Myrtle Beach Art Museum’s 25th anniversary



As a boy, Brian Rutenberg would go fishing on the Cherry Grove pier with his dad, but for him, the real draw was watching the waves form: swell, crest, roll. He would spend hours daydreaming in the ficus tree in his backyard. Wacca Wachee Marina and Brookgreen Gardens were his playground and studio, where he would make art out of rich pluff mud and draw live oaks, magnolia, and loblolly pine. His art education took place in the stacks at Chapin Memorial Library.

Myrtle Beach native and New York City-based artist Rutenberg is firmly rooted in his hometown and early experiences. His brilliant, richly textured oil paintings convey the essence of the Low country backdrop that still permeates his identity. Now, Rutenberg has cemented his permanent connection with the Franklin G. Burroughs-Simeon B. Chapin Art Museum by presenting his original, 2007-08 oil-on-linen work “Cherry Grove IV” to the museum’s permanent collection. This extraordinary gift is made in honor of his parents, John and Sandra Rutenberg, and in recognition of the museum’s 25th anniversary celebration.

“As a curator and museum director, this is a piece you dream about,” says Pat Goodwin, art museum executive director. “It couldn’t be more perfect.”

“Cherry Grove IV” was on display at the Art Museum’s winter 2022 “Synchronicity” exhibit featuring Rutenberg and Alice Ballard. Rutenberg appeared at the museum multiple times during the exhibit and made the decision to donate the piece as a lasting tribute. The gift was facilitated by the Jerald Melberg Gallery in Charlotte, N.C.

“It kind of keeps my parents alive in a way, which makes me feel good,” says Rutenberg. “I’ve had such a support system in Myrtle Beach, from family, from friends, and from the Bellamy Law Firm, who continue to support those exhibitions.”

Brian’s father, John Rutenberg, co-founded the Bellamy Law Firm. Brothers Michael and John live in the area with their families.

Rutenberg recalled his childhood as full of imagination and wonder at the natural landscapes that surrounded him, and he values his parents’ willingness to let him think, play, and dream.

“I’m very, very lucky to have had parents who allowed me to be the most like myself,” says Rutenberg. “They gave me the breadth and the freedom and the time to not necessarily play football in the backyard but to come inside and work with pastels and draw and make things out of tape and wire.”

With no arts curriculum in school and no art museum in town, Rutenberg found inspiration and knowledge in outdoor spaces and in the art history section at Chapin Memorial Library.

“My mom would drop me off [at Chapin Library], and I would comb through the art history section,” Rutenberg says. “The gift in that experience was not what I understood in those art history books, but what I misunderstood.”

It was Rutenberg’s early lesson that an artist must find their own way.

“When you’re reading about something that’s very rich and very complex and you’re 15 years old, you learn almost as much from what you don’t understand as from what you can figure out,” Rutenberg continues. “I would read about these concepts and then go home and try to put things together based on what I learned. I had to figure it out for myself, which is what any artist must arm themselves with from a very early age. There’s no rulebook, there are no talent scouts, there’s no one telling you how to do this. So, I’m very grateful for having to make mistakes and have false ideas about things in the journey of learning about it.”

Rutenberg went on to study at the College of Charleston with William Halsey and Michael Tyzack, where he discovered the larger world of art and artists. Mark Sloan, director of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston from 1994-2020, learned of Rutenberg and his work years after Rutenberg had graduated and moved to New York. Sloan traveled to Rutenberg’s New York studio to meet with the successful alum, and the two began a lifelong friendship.

One unique trait of Rutenberg’s work, Sloan says, is the dichotomy between his drawing process and his painting process.

“He makes drawings that are fairly realistic and well rendered—a tree, a riverbank, a marsh. And then he goes back to his studio, and his paintings are more of a feeling, of an emotional response to a landscape as opposed to an accurate, 1:1 representation,” says Sloan. “His paintings are much more poetry than prose.”

Willie Lee, owner of Lee's Apothecary in Murrells Inlet and lifelong friend of Rutenberg's, recalls their high school years spent at Coastal Academy in Myrtle Beach, when they had classes together, played basketball on the school team, and hung out regularly at the Rutenberg home. However, Rutenberg didn't share the artistic side of his life with Lee. Years after high school and college, when Rutenberg invited Lee to his 1996 art exhibit in Charleston, Lee had a quick reintroduction to his friend.

"When we got there, I didn't see Brian," remembers Lee. "Then he entered the room, and it was like a rock star walked in—the crowd sort of hushed. I was like, 'What? Wait a minute.' So then, this Brian that I grew up with got behind the podium and started speaking about art. He was so in his lane, such a master at his topic, and I was like, 'Oh. Well, okay!'"

Despite his decades of national success within the art world, Rutenberg's gift to the Art Museum reflects the enduring significance of the Grand Strand to his life and his work.

"I had no exposure to art, and my dream was always that Myrtle Beach, my city that I loved and gave me everything, would have its own art museum, would have a place that would curate world-class shows in a clean, well-lit space," says Rutenberg. "One that would have an educational outreach program and have classes in order to expose audiences and young people to all of the things that I held so dear in those early experiences at the library."

Now, Rutenberg says, the Art Museum has fulfilled that dream, and he wants to pass on the gift to the next generation.

"Maybe another kid will walk through and look at the painting and recognize something, and say, 'Wait a minute. I can do that. I've been to this place. I recognize that,' and I think we'll all be the beneficiaries of that," Rutenberg says.

Goodwin feels grateful to Rutenberg on behalf of the entire Grand Strand community.

"Brian's just part of this community," says Goodwin. "He's part of this art museum."