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Painter Hartmut Austen's art fills spaces with stories

by Grayce Scholt | Contributing writer
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Review

"Just Filling Spaces"

- Where: Mott Community College Visual Arts and Design Center, 1401 E. Court St.
- When: Through Nov. 18
- Details: (810) 762-0443

As a painter, Detroit-area artist Hartmut Austen says he fills pictorial space on canvas, as well as space in the gallery. But more importantly, he fills spaces imaginatively, perhaps as allegories, allowing viewers to bring their own interpretations to the works.

His exhibit, "Just Filling Spaces," runs through Nov. 18 at Mott Community College's Fine Arts gallery.

While his paintings are not representational, they conjure up feelings that are personal and rooted in reality. A largely white study, for example, called "Mutter" is homage to the artist's dead mother who has faded from memory as the years pass, but her face remains partly visible at the edge of the work.

"Lichtung," a large, powerful piece, shows a glade in a dark forest where sunlight penetrates the dense blue trees that loom in an almost sinister way over two tiny figures in a lighted clearing. The two are holding bicycles.

Austen calls himself a traditionalist, but he does not attempt to be realistic or "pleasant." Yet the works "tell stories," he says.

In "Kids," another large painting, two figures who might be children are done in broad strokes of shocking crimson that contrasts with the subdued tones of the background.

In a work titled "In the Studio," a half-turned, indiscernible human figure is open to conjecture, but the sharp contrast between the vibrant red and black colors is compelling.

"On the Edge" (also titled "Four Corners") focuses on a lone, heavily outlined figure standing stiffly on what might be a dark wall at the base of the painting. Behind him, the corners of two stark structures, one dark, one light, overlap. The tension between them suggests foreboding enclosures.

Architectural forms appear in several works, but none more predominantly than in "Yellow House." Austen says the painting is "matter-of-fact," but the strong yellow color almost "screams" for the attention of the viewer and is reminiscent of the work of early German expressionists.

"The Island" is not intentionally representational, but the tiny image of a white automobile locked in a dismal, brownish purple surrounding reminds the viewer of the Katrina tragedy in New Orleans, the artist says.

While most of the paintings are oils, the show includes an untitled mixed-media work on paper that is especially moving. It shows a figure tenderly holding an infant. Heavy application of black India ink above the figure contrasts with the gray watercolor wash of the street on which the figure stands.

German by birth and training, Austin came to this country 10 years ago to teach at Wayne State University and the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.

He will give a public presentation about his work at 10 a.m. Nov. 18 in room 129 of the Visual Arts and Design Center.

(www.mlive.com/entertainment/flint/index.ssf/2008/11/painter_hartmut_austens_art_fi.html)