

Artistic impressions from the violent prairie

Strahan works shown at Studio ItaliAna

By Paul Clark
STAFF WRITER

ASHEVILLE — Bennett Strahan doesn't see the same prairie that you do. But he'll make you look closer at the one you don't.

More than 20 of his works are on display this month at Studio ItaliAna. The travelogue of paintings, titled "Paintings from the Road: North Carolina to New Mexico," is inspired by his travels along U.S. 64 between his homes in Lake Lure and Cimarron, N.M.

Strahan, who describes his paintings as "abstract American impressionism," drives the highway every few weeks.

In long, elliptical paintings, he portrays horizons full of prairie fire set deep into Carlos Castaneda-like parallel worlds framing the same in the foreground. Strahan paints a lot of heavy weather — big wind, flashing skies, colliding clouds.

"I believe there's a strong beauty in the violence of nature," he said. "Destruction is fast, but the regrowth is very subtle and slow."

Some of the paintings Strahan has selected for this show were crafted using a Chinese collage process called chincole ("sheen-co-LAY"). Rice paper is laid onto canvas before being painted with oil, acrylic or mixed medium. Also on display are works created using a rare monotype process, which requires painting the reverse image onto glass, then pressing the pane against soft paper for the positive image.

"He walked into the gallery about a year ago, looking for a place to show his work," said Anna Deane, owner of Studio ItaliAna. Strahan liked the contemporary furniture and furnishings there, which do in fact look sharp against his paintings. Deane loves the collective look as well.

"It's the look we're trying to achieve," she said. "He uses really straight lines. But it's soft."

Working through dyslexia

Strahan first harnessed his creativity as a child as he learned to "develop the gift of dyslexia in other people's world," as he puts it. An early IQ test misdiagnosed him with borderline mental retardation. But his great-great uncle, whom he simply refers to as "Uncle," figured out that Strahan simply saw things differently.

"Uncle told me, 'Ain't nothing wrong with you that can't be fixed; you just need some rewiring,'" Strahan said. "He only had a second-grade education, but he was the one who taught me to see even two-dimensional objects, such as type on a page, in three dimensions capable of being rotated in my mind and inter-

To see the exhibit

WHAT: "Paintings from the Flood: North Carolina to New Mexico," works by Bennett Strahan
WHERE: Studio ItaliAna, 25 Patton Ave., Asheville
WHEN: Ongoing through June 30
FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call 250-0567.

preted for a population without 'the gift.'"

As a teenager, Strahan set his sights on a career in architecture. He was one of the few students accepted into Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture school right out of high school, and he paid for his education with odd jobs such as folk singing and automotive work.

He also studied art at Alma College in Alma, Mich., and economics at Lawrence Institute of Technology in Southfield, Mich. He now has a successful architecture practice in Raleigh and an art gallery, Buffalo Nickel, near his home in Cimarron.

Strahan says his dyslexia has helped his art more than anything. He is a visual, multidimensional thinker who can take a mental snapshot of a scene often days before translating it onto paper.

"In the end, I paint what I see," he said. "It may be backward to you or it may not. Perhaps you'll be the one who has to reverse it in your mind."

The show at Studio ItaliAna will be Strahan's first in the Southeast in 10 years and his first ever in Western North Carolina.

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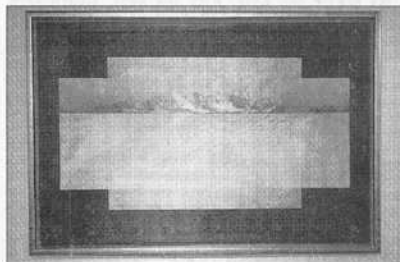
Violence in nature fascinates Bennett Strahan and is a recurring theme in his paintings, such as "Tornado Alley," an acrylic on canvas.



Bennett Strahan has an architecture practice in Raleigh and owns a gallery in Cimarron, N.M. He also keeps a home in Lake Lure.

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ARTIST
BENNETT STRAHAN



Bennett Strahan employs a Chinese collage process called chincole in some of his paintings, such as this "Flint Hills Prairie Fire." It's a process in which rice paper is put on canvas, then painted over and bonded onto the canvas.