

A life of light and beauty

By Mark Lane
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April 14, 2013

ORMOND BEACH — Daniel Ambrose paints old-school style. Way old school. Fifteenth-century old school.

The Ormond Beach painter works in egg tempera, a paint he mixes on the spot because a batch doesn't last more than a day or two. It's made of yolk and powdered pigments, just dirt and eggs. You can find the recipe in books on the Italian Renaissance.



Daniel Ambrose works in his studio. News-Journal/MARK LANE

"It has this airy, translucent quality. It's perfect for Florida," he said. "I couldn't get the atmosphere in acrylics."

Ambrose, gray haired and white bearded at 56, says this sitting in his studio, working on two canvases at a time, in a light, airy room in a duplex near the beach in Ormond Beach.

He says the place has been a huge change for him and he's still figuring out where everything should go. Only last fall he moved from his house near the Tomoka River where he had lived and painted for years. His paintings have reflected this: Studies of riverbanks and marshes observed in the hours when shadows are long.

You may have seen some of those works. His paintings hang in the S. James Foxman Justice Center, Daytona Beach International Airport and Florida Hospital Memorial Medical Center's cancer center lobby. Three of his are in the Museum of Arts and Sciences permanent collection. Two are not currently

on display, but an oil, "Beside Still Waters," hangs at the Florida Hospital Memorial Medical Center courtesy of the museum's Art in Public Places Program.

Two weeks ago, he opened a one-man show at the Hughes Gallery in Boca Grande.

"When I first saw the paintings, they just blew me away," said gallery owner Barbara Hughes. "There aren't that many painters in the nation who work in egg tempera all the time.

"The fact that he's self-taught blows me away, too," she added.

And in fact, Ambrose didn't go to art school, didn't go to college, and started his career as a commercial sign maker in Ormond Beach.

Born in Daytona Beach, Ambrose sees his fascination with riverfront and beachside scenes and colors as an outgrowth of living here all his life.

"Growing up here, I naturally gravitated to the outdoors," he said. "That's always been my subject."

Yet growing up here, the option of working in the arts didn't seem like a real option. "I was always drawn to it but never thought of it as being a career," he said.

After he graduated from Mainland High School in 1973, he felt he had two career paths. "It was construction or tourism, so I picked construction."

Construction led him to a sign business, Signco, which he started with his former wife, Dawn, in 1982, shortly after they were married.

Sign making led him to learn hand lettering. ("The lettering guys were making more than me.") Hand-lettering led to him learning to work with brushes. Learning to work with brushes led him to painting.

He says he went to a Southern Paint store in the mid-1980s, bought some paint and brushes and asked the person behind the counter if anyone local gave painting lessons. Someone did, Barbara Perrotti, an Ormond Beach artist who paints portraits indoors and landscapes outdoors.

By the 1990s, painting was his full-time work.

"I was into wildlife art then in a big way," he recalls. "I was going to go that route."

He did detailed studies of birds, became a regular at Audubon Center for Birds of Prey to learn bird anatomy and traveled the circuit of wildlife art shows and seminars.

But something was happening with his canvases. "My birds got small and smaller, and I found myself painting landscapes," he recalled.

Landscapes of the winding Tomoka River and marshlands nearby. A natural choice. He lived by the Tomoka River, canoed on the Tomoka River and hauled his art supplies over to paint outdoors on the banks of the Tomoka River.

"The Tomoka was my muse," he said.

Somehow, though, the acrylic paints he worked with didn't fully capture the detail of the riverbanks and the glow of sunsets on the water. "I just couldn't get the atmosphere in acrylics," he said.

Instead, he got interested in egg tempera, a medium used by the Renaissance masters and modern realists like Andrew Wyeth.

He didn't know how to make the stuff, so he went to a public library and a helpful librarian arranged an interlibrary loan of a translation of Cennino Cennini's "Il Libro dell' Arte," a 15th-century handbook with recipes for paint.

"If there's a hard way to do something, I'll do it," he said. "Tempera, you gotta make it yourself."

After years of trial and error, false starts and ruined brushes, the new medium made sense to him. "It has this airy, translucent quality that makes it perfect for Florida," he said.

"You can create exactly the color you're looking for," agrees Cynthia Duval, curator at the Museum of Arts and Sciences, talking about the artistic appeal of mixing paints on the spot. She compares the process to improvising on a recipe for food. "You can add and subtract, a pinch of this, bit of that.

"Tempera tends to stay strong with good, strong colors that will last and last and last," she said.

It's also a medium that can be built up in layers you can almost see through and even scraped away if the first try doesn't work. This lends itself to details – individual reeds, bird feathers, cat hairs ... and light that seems to come from a mysterious somewhere just beneath a canvas' surface.

"I saw a glow in his work," Hughes said. "Partly because of the medium – you can do that with tempera – but I saw his spirit, his gentleness, his caring. ... He looks at things differently, has a different vantage point. He can focus on small details."

Ambrose said his new home already has brought changes in his paintings – a lighter palette, seabirds, more light, more white.

"I'm going to do more coastal," he said.

Around his workspace are paintings in all stages of completion: A blank, 5-foot tall canvas hangs on the wall while its primer dries and small canvases line the base of the wall. A nearby scene of the moonlit Tomoka River looks complete, but he insists it needs something else, and a study of a sign jutting from a funky Florida bar leans against the wall. "I used to make those signs," he recalled.

Another, at the base of the wall, looks ready to go, complete with frame, but that's deceptive. "I put a frame on them to cheer me up, and let myself know there's an end in sight," he said.

So in a world awash in images, do all these images on canvas still matter to people?

"These things are handmade, made with care, made with love and made to last. And you know, there's not a lot of that going on in the world today," he said.

And if you're able to give somebody the serenity of seeing a one-of-a kind object in a peaceful setting, "That's doing good in the world."