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By James Auer

Wizard of the Wild: State artist explores mysticism, magic of nature.

By JAMES AUER

There was a time, Tom Uttech enjoys telling newcomers to his tree-studded 60-acre farm a few miles north of Saukville, when he was determined never to make an oil painting again.

He couldn't take the pressures of the art world, with its conflicting demands that he be both individualistic and conformist. He hated the compromises he was constantly being asked to make.

So Uttech had decided simply to teach at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and tend to his family's needs.

But a propensity for late-night doodling did him in.

He found himself sitting at home after dark involuntarily the sleek contours of the deer he had glimpsed in the course of his travels in the border areas shared by the United States and Canada.

Almost before he knew it, he was attaching antlered deer heads to the shoulders of unclad human females who had been mysteriously transported to the North Woods. He took these strangely mutated images to the late Milwaukee art dealer Dorothy Bradley, who was entranced. And a career was reborn.

Today, some 30 years later, Uttech is still very much his own person, and far more famous and prosperous for it – demonstrating his hard-won celebrity by showing work at two separate venues.

"Magnetic North," a semi-retrospective that traces his emergence as a nature-oriented painter and sometime photographer over the past three decades, hangs through Oct. 3 in the Milwaukee Art Museum's Quadracci Pavilion.

A separate showing of recent paintings and photographs runs through Sept. 4 at the Tory Folliard Gallery, 233 N. Milwaukee St.

Both shows embody the rustic mysticism and painterly magic that have caused Jeffrey Hayes, an admirer and UWM-affiliated art historian, to describe Uttech's work as "very much a part of the heart and soul of American landscape painting, in the romantic tradition."

Living with the environment

The 61-year-old Wisconsin-born artist has much to say about art, the environment, the relationship between human beings and wild creatures and humankind's uneasy hold on this planet.

At once visually oriented and verbally fluent, Uttech – who left UWM to freelance several years ago – is a lifelong student of the natural world and an ardent advocate of conservation.

The deer-headed ladies have long since vanished from his repertoire of images, much to the regret of many of his early admirers, but a passion for the natural order remains.

Implicitly, through his oil paintings and monochromatic photographs, and explicitly through his public utterances, he preaches the gospel of respect for all life.

"I'm not optimistic," Uttech said with a sigh recently, during a conversation in the large, converted barn he uses as a painting workshop.

"There are too many things that are waiting to go wrong," he said. "I'm not worried about nature – nature will do just fine. But I am worried about the environment that people use."

He paused for a moment, looking out over the clumps of maple, ash, white cedar and basswood trees that dot his property just beyond the large, picture window.

Then he continued, with obvious concern:

“Our lives could get pretty uncomfortable. There are just too many problems that could come together and make life much more difficult for us. There’s the whole issue of global warming. And the fact that invasive species are cross-pollinating the world.

“Here in Wisconsin, we’ve lost chestnuts and elms. Now there’s oak blight and a maple problem. Every time it rains, I see topsoil washing out of farm fields. It won’t take that much longer, and we’re going to be farming gravel pits.”

Nature, Uttech added, “doesn’t care if it’s a gravel pit or a pecan forest. It’s all wonderful for nature, but it’s not going to be wonderful for us...Nature doesn’t give a (expletive). Life goes on, with or without us.”

The same concern for the persistence of a livable ecology pervades Uttech’s work. But in this case the warnings are subtle, accomplished with a degree of technical wizardry and imaginative fantasy that links him more with expressive artists such as Edvard Munch and Gustav Klimt than with such sensationalized recorders of a specific landscape as the German traveler and painter Albert Bierstadt.

For one thing, Uttech’s landscapes, though filled with illuminating detail, are invariably without people.

For another, his wild creatures—black bears, beavers, wolves and birds of all sorts – are presented with a humbling nobility and powerful physical appeal that endows them with identity even as it avoids facile characterization, à la Walt Disney.

They gaze out questioningly, their curiosity tinted by confrontation.

Creatures with a message

It’s easy to understand why New York art critic John Yau looks upon Uttech’s work as “paradisiacal,” yet at the same time “darker and more ominous” than seemingly related landscape paintings by artists of the Hudson River school.

Considered in this light, the creatures that inhabit Quetico Provincial Park in Canada, one of Uttech’s favorite haunts, may be, as Yau has suggested, messengers rather than merely figures in a larger landscape.

The creatures’ message is the observer’s to interpret. But Uttech’s personal sympathies are obvious: identifies with those that move four feet, rather than two.

Often, Uttech shows his furry subjects looking out of the paw-print adorned frame as if to catch the gaze of the casual viewer. Just as often, however, they are moving fearfully from right to left, fleeing an unseen invader who is threatening the sanctity of their feeding grounds.

That invader, of course, is man.

It is this dark and fearful vision that balances out the beauty and harmony in Uttech’s paintings, in oil canvas or board. And it is this vision that makes Uttech’s two relative shows more than merely a pleasurable romp in the North Woods.

They add up, instead, to a passionate exercise in messianic prophet lyrically worked out so that the materials of traditional European thought and practice.

There is no exploitation here, or empathy and affectionate recall.

The paintings, first sketched out the working surface in charcoal, the painstakingly executed in thin washes of oil paint, are complemented big-scale photographs taken on film by Uttech, then blown up digitally the Walker’s Point studio of camera artist Tom Bamberger.

The end product is symphonic on a grand scale without being either pretentious or grandiose.

More than illustrations, more than exhortations, Tom Uttech's images are visible presences rather than merely pictures.