

## THE RELUCTANT ARTIST

A conversation with  
Tom Uttech

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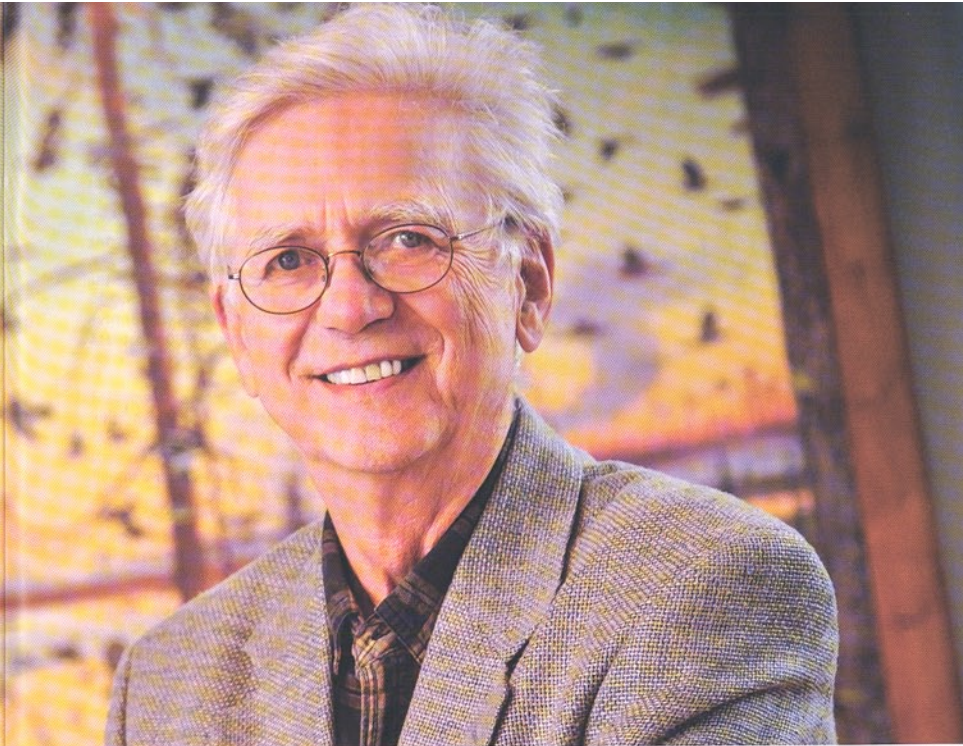
Tom Uttech, *Enassomishhinjiweian* (detail),  
2009, oil on canvas.



# THE RELUCTANT ARTIST

A CONVERSATION  
WITH TOM UTTECH

INTERVIEW BY LINDA DEBERRY



Tom Uttech's large painting, *Enassamishhinijjweian*, is an arresting work. It is a favorite among Crystal Bridges' visitors, partly due to the questions it raises. What is happening? Where are all the animals going? What is the bear looking at? No two viewers will interpret the scene in the same way. The painting is part of large body of work in which hosts of woodland animals crowd the canvas—careening through landscapes that are breathtaking in their combination of realism and dreamlike mystery. Uttech, a native of Wisconsin, has a lifelong, abiding love of the outdoors. He makes regular long trips by canoe into the Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada, deep into a wilderness that is inaccessible by any other means. The landscapes he creates arise wholly from his imagination: they are not painted from memory or a composite of photographs. Perhaps it is this imaginary origin that lends them their distinctly otherworldly air. The titles of many of his works, including the one in Crystal Bridges' collection, are taken from the Ojibwe language. Uttech made a visit to Crystal Bridges to give a public presentation this summer, and we had an opportunity to talk with him about his life and his work.

Doro Saifred

**C:** I read that your experience as an art student left you feeling so disillusioned that you stopped painting for a while. Can you talk about why you felt that way and what brought you back to painting?

**TU:** I was under pressure to conform to the prevailing interests and styles that were preferred and supported by other artists, and particularly some of the teachers I had in graduate school. I succumbed to that to some extent—to try to modify my own personality to conform, or to be a part of that thing which was what I thought was the art world. And I lost more and more of my own self the longer time went.

I got a job at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, where I had gone to school. And one of the first people I ran into was a student who had been a year ahead of me and was now a graduate student at UWM. We were talking and he asked what I was doing, and I told him I was doing this kind of painting. And the guy looked down his nose at me and said, "You're still painting?" And he made a number of caustic and sarcastic remarks about how absolutely nobody paints anymore.

I continued painting for a little while longer, but the seed had been planted by that conversation with him to become more and more dissatisfied with what I had done

to myself. And at some point I just finally said: if in order to be an artist I have to keep compromising myself, I just couldn't be an artist any more, and I chose not to be.

During the time that I wasn't an artist, I still did stuff—I drew, because I'd been doing this all my life and I just incessantly drew. And in the process, I realized that what I was doing was exorcising the wrong directions out of my life and introducing some new kinds of thoughts and images that had just been buried or had not been born. And after a while they became more and more interesting to me. They were just totally odd and out of touch with what anybody else was





Left: Tom Uttech, *Nin Kabikawa*, 2002, oil on canvas.

thinking about or caring about. But it made no difference because I didn't have to worry about it anymore because I wasn't an artist, I was just this character amusing myself.

And one of [these drawings] I liked enough that I thought: you know, I've got this canvas sitting around from back in the old days when I was an artist...and I made a version of that drawing on that canvas and painted it. And it was fun, and I thought: oh, this was not so bad. So I started painting again. But it was altogether under the auspices of not being an artist.

**C: What is your process in creating your work?**

**TU:** It starts with charcoal and an eraser—an old cotton t-shirt or something. I don't refer to photographs. The places aren't real places. I work it until it looks like a place I'd really like to be.

It builds up from a careful

structure—a mathematical manipulation of space in order to present a structure that's not visible, but is like the skeleton inside your body. I paint the way Bach would compose music. It's a combination of controlled mess and absolute stability. They have to be both at the same time. After I get the sketch, I paint in brown and work from the background to the foreground, bringing the landscape forward. Then I place a few very prominent animals, get those anchored in those spots.

I also like to make things more than they appear to be. It's all in an effort to engage people—so it's not the sort of painting that you walk right by.

**C: I read one interview in which you said: "One large painting can take me a year and a half and in the first year you feel like an abject failure." Is the creative process more pleasure or pain for you?**

**TU:** Pain. I've painted more than 950 paintings. And I bet four of them have been easy. The rest are a real knock-down, drag-out fight. But fighting keeps you alive and makes you work harder. It's a question of pain equals growth... or at least not atrophy.

**C: You use a lot of very challenging Ojibwe words as titles. Please, tell us how to pronounce the name of our painting!**

**TU:** I can't. I got those words from a lexicon from the 1600s created by a priest.

Every kid is interested in Indians, wanting to know meanings of terms. Growing up in the north, everything has an Indian name. It becomes a mindset: what does that mean?

Well, the titles of paintings can start to get really dumb: "two trees and a standing bear." I like artists coming up with names that had nothing to do with what the work was about. My paintings are fiction, so the titles could be made up as well. So I started looking for words on maps and stealing place names. Around that time, the Director of American Studies at UW-M gave me the lexicon. I will look at the Ojibwe words and see if the translation has anything to do with the painting. If it does, I'll use it. I don't translate the titles because I want them to be evocative mysteries, the same way I want the paintings to be. I want them to be as puzzling as the images.

**C: I know you think of yourself as a storyteller. But there also seems to be a slightly ominous feeling to some of the works. What kind of story are you telling?**

**TU:** The truth. I have been most interested in what it feels like to be in the woods at dusk, or at dawn. If you're interested in biology, that's where all the action is. Even as a little kid I spent a lot of mornings outside before it was light out yet, just to experience the approaching daylight.

And the evening is especially that way because it is also tinged with the business of the approaching darkness, and you know—all the bears coming out of the woods to get you and all that stuff, or the wolves howling.

So the images largely come about from that interest in the crepuscular times of the day and what they feel like—and that's basically ominous to most people. Once you're really used to that, it's comforting. But at the same time it's got that double-edged thing where it is ominous. That's fun... when things can be both at the same time. You're living then in a different state of being. Instead of everything being comfortable or everything being dangerous there's a—I don't know how to describe it, but it's a sort of metaphysical place when everything is between.

**C: You spend a lot of time out in nature, how long do you stay and what are you doing while you're out?**

**TU:** If I were to go out into the woods and look for things, there are ways of becoming invisible—or less threatening—to the critters that they will reveal themselves more. By being very still and by being low to the ground and not wearing [bright-colored] bicycle-riders clothes, you can sort of become invisible. I still manage to spend some time deer hunting—sitting in a stand off the ground—but I hang a bird feeder there. So I've got chickadees; they fly in to get the sunflower seeds, and they go so close past me when they leave that I can feel the wind that their wings have displaced. I've had a nuthatch one time land on my knee and just hop around. I had a cup of coffee in my hand, and he hopped up onto my hand and then he hopped up onto my cup of coffee and was drinking out of it.

So I like to do that kind of stuff where you can sort of just become invisible. Your brain becomes invisible, also—you're not conscious of your own self and you just sort of absorb the stuff that's out there. [I also take] long trips into the wilderness—in my case by means of canoe—and go out for two or three weeks. A lot of them I do by myself so there's no distracting conversation. You know, if you and I go out in the woods like that, we could both be very interested in what we're looking at, but somehow we always find a way to talk about something, it's unavoidable. And as soon as you do that sort of a thing, you're no longer present in the woods, completely. So going by myself, or with somebody I could be really quiet with, like my wife, we don't have to talk...it's surprising how much stuff will open up to you.

**C: There is a huge volume of creatures in your paintings. Is that a snapshot over time of the volume of creatures you experience out in nature?**

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Tom Uttech, *Enassamishinjijweian*, 2009, oil on canvas.

## THE ARTIST TELLS ALL

Tom Uttech reveals hidden imagery in *Enassamishinjijweian*

During Tom Uttech's engaging presentation at Crystal Bridges in October, the artist pointed out several hidden images included in his painting. We just couldn't resist sharing these with a wider audience. Next time you are at the Museum, be sure to spend some time with this intriguing work and do some deep looking. You will be surprised at all you may find!

1. The shoreline on the right side of the painting takes the shape of a wolf facing to the right.
2. The land form at the center left of the work takes the shape of a wolf running toward the left.
3. A lynx's eye can be seen in the colors of the sunset at the center of the painting.
4. Far in the distance, across the lake, if you look carefully you will see the tiny image of a bear, standing on its hind legs, looking our way. This scene is a diminutive double of another of Uttech's paintings, titled *Nin Kabikawa*, shown on page 32.
5. Uttech likes to include birds or animals that are overpainted, and appear as pentimento images, rising up through the overlying layer of paint. You can see a number of pentimento ghost-birds in flight across the canvas.
6. Look for animals that appear to be emerging out of the landscape, blurring the line between this world and some other; such as the bluejay that seems to be flying out of the background at lower left.
7. Uttech builds and embellishes all his own frames, and each is custom-made for a specific painting. He says the images on the frame can enhance the image on the canvas—that the frame can be in "another world... it can be fantasy." Notice the shape of the bear at lower right: does it have legs... or is that a long, serpentine tail?



**TU:** Believe it or not it's an understated image of the number of things that are out there. All that stuff is present, but most of it is not just out in the open and revealing itself. Everything I have said so far reveals my complete obsession with nature. But the paintings, however, are about something in addition to that.

What I always try to do is make images that explore, examine, and convey human interests and concerns about our lives here in our surroundings in this day and age. Whatever observations, suggestions, celebrations, or criticisms I feel the need to make are expressed in a language which is conveyed emotionally more than intellectually. The grammar of that language are images of nature and how they are organized and combined. This grammar includes things like the choice of the inhabitants of that landscape, how they are described, the color and tone of them, where they occur in the space of the painting, the references to time, light, seasons, their activities, their relationship to the viewers—which then are all woven together by the complexities of design into what I hope is a felt experience which will interest and affect viewers in a strong and predictable way.

The [number of animals] in the painting you have is a direct lineage from a very frustrating, boring and bad painting, which happens to me much more often than I would like to admit. I had one landscape that was—I tell you, it was just as ordinary as ordinary can get. I decided to just try to do something to make it more interesting, so I threw three or four wolves in it. And that *did* make the painting more interesting. And I thought: well you know, if four wolves could do that, what would twelve do? Oh, it makes it *more* interesting!

And it just grew: what if there could be some birds flying through, too? And I thought: that's really a dumb idea, who in the world could handle a painting of birds flying through it? I meant that's one of oldest clichés. But I put them in there and the painting was more interesting. Then everything snapped and I just sort of... okay, just fill it up! And I did and that was much more interesting. Compared to your painting, it still wasn't very many—maybe there were 30 birds, and it seemed like—how could anyone do something that ridiculous? But it was more fun, so I did some more and it just kept growing and growing and growing to the point where they are what they are now. But that all just started as a way to avoid screwing up a painting completely. There was no philosophy, there was no meaning, the fact that they went from one side to the other meant nothing, it just grew that way.

“WHAT I ALWAYS TRY TO DO IS MAKE IMAGES THAT EXPLORE, EXAMINE, AND CONVEY HUMAN INTERESTS AND CONCERNS ABOUT OUR LIVES HERE IN OUR SURROUNDINGS IN THIS DAY AND AGE.”

**C:** And some of them are looking back at us...

**TU:** There are some that do, yeah. The idea of having an animal looking out at the viewer, that's real old in my work. I'm actually thinking now of doing one where everything is looking at you.

The bear looking at us started just as a confrontation. I mean, I grew up with the concern that I would be running into bears in the woods. People always were very afraid of them. We were out there in bear country, and that's what they'd say every time you go out the door: "Watch out for bears!" And I never saw one. So it started out just being bears [that looked out at the viewer]. Then after a while I realized I was using them sort of the way a painter would use people in the landscape, or self-portraits. And without intending it to be that way, it sort of has become that way. I was asked by the *New Yorker* to do a self-portrait as part of a series they did—and this was at a point where I hadn't drawn a human being in 20 years, much less drawn a picture of myself. So I drew a bear.

**C:** In your paintings, the animals all seem to live in harmony. Bears and wolves might inhabit the same space without there seeming to be any tension. There are indications of the presence of death in the fallen or dying trees, but there's no sign of predation, there's no sign of fear in your images.

**TU:** I think that showing predation is a little bit too literal. The trees dying and that stuff, that's a metaphorical thing. When you get out into the real woods you see that nothing ever dies. I mean the trees fall over, but they're still the host of an incredible amount of life. And then as they decompose even more they become home to other things, and finally they become soil which supports other things. So there is no life and death in the woods, it's just all a continuum in transition and the animals are very transitory. All of us creatures are, we're very transitory. ●