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CHARLES THOMPSON: EN PLEIN AIR PAINTINGS

University of New England at Biddeford
Campus Center
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, Maine

Through mid-January

CHARLES THOMPSON HASN'T PUT BRUSH TO CANVAS IN A STUDIO — OR ANYWHERE WITH A ROOF AND WALLS, FOR THAT MATTER — FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS. INSTEAD, THE ARTIST HAS WORKED EXCLUSIVELY IN THE EMBRACE OF NATURE, PAINTING FROM HIS FIRST STROKE TO HIS FINISHING TOUCHES AMID TREES AND COASTLINES AND MEANDERING STREAMS — IN ALL TYPES OF WEATHER, ALL HOURS OF THE DAY, ALL YEAR LONG.



Rocks, 2010, oil on panel.

"I love painting outside," said the longtime painter and art professor at the University of New England in Biddeford, where a selection of his landscapes is on display through mid-January. "I love the information it gives me."

Unlike other plein air painters, who often work part of the time outside and finish up in the studio by relying on snapshots or drawings, Thompson prefers the entire process to be on site and in the moment, and he'll often spend weeks habitually

returning to the same spot at the same time of day until he completes a piece.

Working from a picture or a drawing just isn't the same — neither can fully capture the color, the light, the feeling of a place, said the Saco-based artist, who has been featured in dozens of solo and group exhibitions across the country and even in Rome.

And, he says, he doesn't mind battling the elements — and good thing, given Maine's bitter winters, mud season and black fly swarms. In fact, "I love to work outside in the snow," he said. (Except, he acknowledged, it's difficult in temps below 25 degrees, as the paints become stubborn and sticky.)

Although he's had opportunities to paint elsewhere, he prefers the rusticity and beauty of Maine, describing "the trees, the sky, the landscape, the rocky coast" that gets a "tough and scruffy" look at low tide. It ultimately just feels different,

he said, as if the skies and clouds are somehow closer to the earth.

And although he's worked outside for just about three decades now, it hasn't always been in the calm and quiet of nature. In fact, in the beginning, it was quite the opposite: he started in the 1970s on the hectic and grilly streets of Philadelphia. Securing his canvases to street signs and wearing headsets to block out the noise, the graduate of Tyler School of Art created cityscapes amid "the dreaded exhaust fumes, and the street people who tried to steal my paint brushes." (To appease them, he learned to keep dollar bills in his



Autumn Fore, 2011, oil on panel.

pockets.)

Slowly, over the years, trees began to replace buildings, and all signs of man were gradually blotted out. Finally, after moving to Saco in 1991, the natural world completely took over; Thompson began to work en plein air on the rugged coastline, on the shores of trickling brooks, beside stands of trees hued with the colors of autumn.

This array of landscapes is represented in his nine paintings now on display at the UNF Campus Center. Created at a handful of sites in Biddeford and Saco in different seasons and at various times of day, they depict sunsets in pink and purple splashed on rocks overlooking rippling ocean waves, hills dashed with snow in the still and clear winter, streams clustered by stands of trees in the low light of fall with leaves bunched up on their banks.

In some cases, Thompson returns to the same spot over and over, seeing it in literally new lights. In "June Vision," for instance, painted near Cascade Falls in Saco, a double-trunked tree lays like a bridge over a narrow waterway, the woods around lush with summer. Another untitled

piece brings a more surrealist quality to the same spot, showing the same downed tree, the entire surrounding landscape blushed with the pink and purple shades of morning.

If you look at them long enough, you can feel the different seasons, colors, lights and states — water high and low, clear and muddy, colored by the changing sky, sometimes rushing and choppy, other times mirror-still — and the rotation of growth, vibrancy and decay as seasons work their endless rotation.

But ultimately, these aren't your typical charming and photogenic Maine locations — Thompson specifically seeks out nooks and hidden-away places that locals pass by every day.

"I've always tried to find mundane spots, rather than picturesque ones, to look at," he explained as he stood in paint-speckled clothes beside his array of paintings. "I really want to take the ordinary things and make them extraordinary."

Taryn Plumb

