

Plein air artist laments disappearing landscapes

By **BOB KEYES**
Staff Writer

BIDDEFORD — Charles Thompson doesn't consider himself a political person, and he's not interested in making art that advances social or political agendas. But as a plein air painter who's been working directly with the landscape for nearly 50 years, Thompson's appreciation of and concern for the natural world are part of his daily practice.

"I am an environmentalist," he said. "As a landscape artist, I don't like seeing the landscape destroyed. That bothers me."

Thompson dedicates his latest exhibition of oil paintings at the University of New England at Biddeford to what he calls the "Lost Landscapes" of Biddeford and Saco. He paints scenes from the area that have changed over the last 100 years, focusing on the impact of man on nature. This body of work includes paintings of strip malls, smokestacks and million-dollar homes, where there once



"Saco Island (MERC)," oil on canvas.

were open lots looking out to the sea, jewel-like waterfalls and thick forests.

"The work is very different work for me, in that it has architecture with little landscape other than industrial views," said Thompson, who teaches art at UNE.

In some ways, it's a return to his roots. Thompson began painting outdoors on the streets of Philadelphia and learned the importance of painting from life in a gritty, urban setting. When he moved to Maine, architecture and the urban landscape began disappearing from his work, replaced with clouds, water and trees.

The natural beauty of Maine overcame Thompson and his art.

He's lived in Saco for 25 years and has always appreciated its rural character. Painting within a few miles of his home, he's made pictures of waterfalls, sunny beaches and banks of trees knee-deep in snow. Saco and the surrounding area continue to inspire him. He paints ordinary places that hold extraordinary beauty.

"I feel very much at home in Saco, and I really love painting where I live," he said.

"Lost Landscapes" stemmed from a visit to the Dyer Library in Saco, where he came upon a book of photos of Saco from a century ago. As he looked through the book, he recognized many of the photos as places he likes to paint and was disturbed by the changes in the landscape over time. He chose seven photographs from the book and set out to make paintings with their contemporary views. The exhibition contrasts those early black-and-white photographs with Thompson's corresponding paintings.

They're not necessarily flattering. These are paintings of parking lots, shopping plazas and private homes with "no



Photos courtesy of Charles Thompson

"Fortunes Rock Beach," oil on canvas.

trespassing" signs. As Thompson notes in his artist statement, "Unfortunately, these landscapes have been largely lost to the insatiable human demand for possession and development. Time and progress stand still for no one."

"Lost Landscapes" is on view through Aug. 1.

Staff Writer Bob Keyes can be contacted at 791-6457 or at:

bkeyes@pressherald.com
Twitter: [pphbkeyes](https://twitter.com/pphbkeyes)

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Charles Thompson, "Lost Landscapes"
WHERE: Ketchum Library art gallery, University of New England, 11 Hills Beach Road, Biddeford
WHEN: 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, through Aug. 1.
HOW MUCH: Free
MORE INFO: une.edu/artgallery