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Reverence on roofing paper

The unique and spiritual art of Tres Taylor has arrived in Fairhope

By LESLEY FARREY PACEY

Spontaneously, almost subconsciously, Tres Taylor sketches spirituality on tarpaper. Motivated by an urgency to share his unfolding epiphanies about life, love and spirituality, this biochemist turned self-taught artist uses all kinds of materials to record images of monks, couples and ordinary men and women bearing flowers and blissful expressions.

His compositions are reverence on roofing paper – symbols of love, Divine love, peace and joy. They represent the sacredness Taylor sees in everyday people and his admiration for men of religious devotion.

"The monk is obviously a symbol of a spiritual place," Taylor said. "They are trained to give reverence to everything they do – whether it is washing dishes or planting a garden. They try to stay in that place of thankfulness no matter what they do. The idea is that each day is a gift and each minute is a gift."

The 49-year-old Birmingham artist contends he is closest to God when he is painting.

"He uses my hands to show my brothers and sisters what He has shown me, which is, when our hearts are free to love, then we will see and experience the world as Gerald Manley Hopkins once wrote – as being 'charged with the grandeur of God.'"

Taylor describes the process by which he creates his vibrant, richly hued Picasso-like paintings as a dance. Moving to the beat of his heart and his favorite jazz, samba or Brazilian music, Taylor spreads out some 60 feet of the thick black paper, using a roller to paint it white. Then, with screwdriver in hand, he scribbles whatever feels right.



Tres Taylor's work captures the spirit of peace, love and joy.



"I immediately felt this tremendous sense of catharsis, almost a healing. It felt so good to paint that I never stopped."

- Tres Taylor, finding his passion's outlet.



"It's just kind of run down this giant canvas and carve out these figures," Taylor said. "I basically listen to music that I love and get in a space where I can scratch out my stories and figures. It is a doodle, I guess - a real unconscious kind of dance. There is a certain joy that comes from the music and it comes out through my fingertips and the tip of that screwdriver."

The tarpaper enables Taylor to draw freely, carving in strong black lines. With layers of mud, sometimes Alabama red clay, his paintings boast a rich, yet raw, texture. With a combination of house and acrylic paint, he layers on color fearlessly.

Kelley Lyons, co-owner of The Lyons Share Gallery in Fairhope, asked Taylor to be the featured artist for the First Friday Art Walk on August 3 because she was impressed with Taylor's childlike fearlessness.

She was not surprised when six of Taylor's "Sweet Apple" paintings sold in one week. They are simple sketches of Taylor's childhood home in Mentone.

"I saw his work and I loved it," Lyons said. "You know when you fall in love with a piece of children's art that is just phenomenal and then they grow up and forget how to paint like that? Well he hasn't forgotten. He is just so free with his strokes . . . He hasn't lost the spontaneity of a child."

Lyons says Taylor's color palette is serendipitous. "Most people wouldn't put these colors together, but they work. I also like his work because all his pieces are very spiritual."

Taylor knows all about faith. He left a high-paying job as a biochemist to become an artist. "This is a total leap of faith," he said. "But that is what it is all about: faith."

"When I left my job in biochemistry I was scared to death," Taylor said. "But I had to leave it because I was dying (inside). I was

42 and something was truly lacking. I discovered painting a year and a half before I quit my job, and it saved me." He began painting in 1999.

Taylor did plenty of soul searching, both spiritual and psychological, but it was a trip home to Alabama that provided the unexpected answer. "In the Christmas of 1998, I came home and a friend suggested we visit all these folk artists at their homes," Taylor said.

When Taylor returned to San Diego, he was so inspired that he grabbed some discarded wood from outside a museum and began painting. "I was having relationship problems at the time and I painted this man and a woman pulling apart from the middle - at the heart," he said. "I immediately felt this tremendous sense of catharsis, almost a healing. It felt so good to paint that I never stopped."

Tres Taylor says his Fairhope show is an expression of joy.

"You are going to see men and women celebrating," he said. "A lot of times you will see them kind of flying, or often holding a flower or a basket of flowers. It is all about celebrating the joy of our lives, even in the midst of our pain. We need that now because our country and our environment are very sick."

Taylor has exhibited in Japan, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, Florida and Pennsylvania, but he is glad to be home.

"I have traveled the world, and now I see all the riches (Alabama) has," he said. "When I go into these small towns, I love how sweet and gentle everyone is."

Back in Birmingham, Taylor and his wife Helene spend most Wednesdays painting with children. The couple recently launched their Rural Mural Project, where they paint a mural with children on tarpaper. The murals are

later sold piece-by-piece for charity.

The project is intended for Black Belt towns in Alabama, although the Taylors recently worked with children from a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Bethlehem, PA to make a 180-foot mural. In June, they painted with 117 children in Marion, AL. Their goal is to reach other Alabama towns such as Eutaw, Greensboro and Selma.

"I thought wouldn't it be great to plant a seed in the Black Belt communities because there are so many talented artists there," Taylor said.

In his art, Taylor is constantly searching for himself and striving to acquire the virtues of holy men: restraint, self-sacrifice and, above all, thankfulness to God for each day.

"It is not that I want to run off and live on a mountain, but there are certain attributes of the way they live and I strive for that," he said. "We are all struggling, going down the river in different boats. Some are further down the river and they can yell at us that there is a waterfall over there."

Asked where he is on that river, Taylor laughs. "I've got one foot in the boat and another on the shore, with a long way to

paddle," he said. "Intellectually, I know what is important, but putting all that into practice is hard. There are many days when I am stressed . . . but all the great spiritual leaders say 'It is in the striving.' You have to strive. If we don't strive, our lives stop being magical." ◀

Tres Taylor's work will be at The Lyons Share Gallery throughout August. For more information, call (251) 928-2507 or visit the gallery at 333 Do La Maro Ave. in Fairhope.