

STATE

Scientist trades microscope for paint brush

Biochemist decides to chuck successful career to pursue his love of art

By **KATHY KEMP**
The Birmingham News

MENTONE — Tres Taylor's art is a complex blend of the primitive and the sophisticated, as is the artist himself.

Two years ago, Taylor, who has a master's degree in biochemistry, chucked a high-paying research job to create swirling, expressionistic paintings, often of monks and gods, and sometimes of nude women. In Japan, where Taylor most often has exhibited his work, his style has been compared to that of the late Shiko Munakata, a celebrated printmaker known as "the Japanese Picasso."

"All my paintings are accidents — wonderful little accidents," says Taylor, who uses house paint on rice paper, tin and wood, the latter most often salvaged from a junk dealer. His paintings seldom fetch more than \$500, and often considerably less. But Taylor, who grew up in wealth and privilege in Mountain Brook, seems unconcerned with material comforts.

"Art has been so joyful and liberating for me," he said. "I don't need much stuff."

That's why, of late, every evening at sunset, the tall, lanky 44-year-old painter folds himself into a tin washtub filled with water heated by a bonfire underneath, and bathes as the stars appear.

"The pipes in the house froze when it went down to 8 degrees in January, and I just haven't had time to get them fixed," he says. "Even when the pipes are fixed, I'll never take a bath indoors again. Being outside like this is magical."

Taylor has spent four months working on paintings for a show in Birmingham — a one-man exhibition, "Love Supreme," that opened Friday at Lawler Taylor Gallery in Vestavia Hills. The gallery is owned by his younger



The Associated Press

Mentone artist Tres Taylor examines a painting in his studio.

sister-in-law, Stacey Lawler.

To prepare, Tres, whose given name is William Henry Taylor, has settled into a mountaintop cabin in northeast Alabama that has been in his family for 35 years. The Taylors dubbed their Mentone home Sweet Apple for the large apple tree in the back yard. Here, the five Taylor kids — nearly all of whom are artists — spent long, playful summers with their mother, Lillian, while their father, Dr. Bill Taylor, worked as an ear, nose and throat specialist in Birmingham.

Taylor has returned to the clapboard cabin, with little money and a carefree heart, to look for himself in the brush strokes

illumination of stars.

His inspiration comes from the love-obsessed poets Rumi and Neruda, whose words Taylor often includes on canvas. His paintings seem inspired by Alabama's folk artists and also by Taylor's travels in Japan, Australia and South America.

"My brother has always been an adventurous, romantic soul," Fonde Taylor says. "What started as therapy for him has become a kind of passion."

Tres Taylor believes he would have found his way back to Mentone soon enough without the personal crisis that caused him to re-evaluate his life. Although he is cryptic about the upheaval,



The Associated Press

An untitled painting by Tres Taylor shows an example of his work.

1998-99 while he was working as a research assistant in cellular and molecular medicine at the University of California, San Diego.

Long divorced, with a daughter who's almost 22, Taylor was unhappy with his work and with a relationship that should have ended long before.

"I was just basically deeply troubled," he says. "I had a lot of anger inside me I hadn't been aware of. I had this rage, this nasty tongue, that was not pretty to be around."

He began tapping into his spiritual side, saying prayers at an altar he built in his bedroom. During a Christmas trip home to Alabama, Taylor, after glancing at a book on Alabama visionary folk artists, decided to visit some of those self-taught creators. He met painters Myrtice West of Centre and Jimmy Lee Sudduth of Fayette and, in Georgia, artist R.A. Miller, who told Taylor he ought to go home and paint.

So back in San Diego, the biochemist picked up wood he found on the side of the road, bought a can of paint at Home Depot, and created his first