

Of Icarus, Angels And Ladders: The Inspiration And Artwork Of Michael Stearns

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In a two-room art studio tucked behind Retro Row, paint-speckled floor is the product of Michael Stearns' canvas artwork. Paintings line the walls, sculptures made with repurposed materials hang from the ceiling and Stearns wears a T-shirt with a slogan about society's excessive consumption, sipping a Portfolio Coffeehouse pick-me-up.

"I like using natural materials for the recycled effect, which creates an energy between the urban issue of packaging and wrapping, and our obsession with overabundance . . . We eat too much, and we buy too much," Stearns said. "What I'm trying to do is create a balance between the urban and natural society. It's a very spiritual issue for me."

Stearns works with cardboard and newspapers as a way to bring nature and urban society together. He focuses on what he named "thought-provoking concepts." The paper ladders propped up around his studio are a result of his time spent with the Navajo Indians in Colorado and Hopi Indians in Arizona. The native tribes use the ladders to send their energy from the Kivas – or holy houses – up to spirits residing on mountaintops. The ladders also give spirits a way to come back down, he said.

With sculptures titled "Every Mother's Soldier" and "Johnny," much of Stearns' inspiration stems from the draft. Stearns was a war photographer in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. Although he was on an aircraft carrier and never saw any combat, he came within five miles of Vietnam when his carrier made a navigation mistake. When he left the service, he protested the war.

Stearns said he has to be in the right emotional state of mind to create figures like "Valkyrie," an angel from Norse Mythology, which embraces a fallen soldier with multiple arms as it carries him to Nirvana. "These are not unique to Vietnam, but there is a concept that war damages and scars us all, regardless of what side you're on. There is no moral high ground. Innocent people get hurt . . . It hurts us as a people in the big picture. These are my statements," Stearns said.

Stearns was born into an artistic family in San Diego, and started painting lessons at

age nine. He followed his artistic path throughout high school, but when he reached California State University, Los Angeles he decided his future was in marine biology. After three years of studying sci-

ence, he jumped back into painting and ceramics. But he soon needed to do "real work" to feed his family, so he took a hiatus from his artistic passions and didn't return to the art scene until age 60. That was 10

years ago.

Stearns has spent his artistic career in Long Beach, which he considers a "music town. . . . It's interesting because people don't have the same relationship with their ears that they do with their eyes," he said. "They can sit and listen to music and it allows them to absorb it more easily, than visually." He said if he can make his audience look at his work with the same open-mindedness as they do music, "That works for me."

He believes the city's musical status makes it more difficult for painters and sculptors to have their art taken seriously, even though they deal with the same emotions as poets and musicians. "You can have an open mic for poetry or music, but it's really hard to do an open mic for a painting or sculpture," he said. "You're really exposing yourself . . . Being willing to stand up, basically naked on stage, and say, 'here I am, warts and all. I'm going to ask you to love me.' That's the toughest part."

Rejection is a harsh and common reality for artists, but Stearns said being older gives him an advantage since he has experience measuring the potential of a piece. "I know what's okay, and what's good. There are times as an artist when you become obsessed about what you're creating. That obsession is probably like taking too many drugs . . . I am a child of the '60s."

He also said age teaches how to handle rejection more easily over time. Although rejection always feels personal, he said, young artists should prepare to not be recognized as a "great," but rather "be true to what creativity goes on inside them." . . . Even if that means being like the Greek Mythology character Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and melted as he fell to his death. "Don't be afraid to chase what you think are probably crazy dreams. There's a little bit of Icarus in all of us. If you get too close to the sun and you fail, at least you really flew," he said.

Stearns' sculptures and paintings are on view throughout Long Beach, including the 2nd City Council Gallery, Long Beach Playhouse and architecture firm Studio One Eleven. For more information on Michael Stearns, visit www.michaelstearnsstudio.com. ■



Artist Michael Stearns has been a Long Beach resident for more than 40 years. His work includes canvas paintings and sculptures made of repurposed materials, with inspiration from his time in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. His work can be seen at 2nd City Council Gallery, The Gallery at the Long Beach Playhouse, architecture firm Studio One Eleven and at his studio, which is at 2218 E. 4th St. For more information on Michael Stearns visit www.michaelstearnsstudio.com. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)