



A STROKE OF INSPIRATION

Denis Gaston creates thought-provoking paintings and is an advocate for art appreciation.

By Jenny Carey • Photos by Will Staples

Aspiring artists could do well to spend time with Dunedin's Denis Gaston. The mixed media artist has enjoyed substantial public success, and is very aware of what it takes to make it in the art world.

Gaston is a thoughtful, dedicated artist who is able to articulate how art is a business and what you need to do to be successful. And while he might appreciate community support for affordable artist housing, his energy is spent on his artwork and creating exhibition opportunities for himself and others.

Gaston is a local boy. "I went to Clearwater High School, St. Petersburg Junior College and graduated from the University of

Florida. Except for a period of time when I worked in Atlanta doing commercial art, I have lived here my whole life."

His artwork is included in some of the area's best public, corporate and private collections, including the Polk Museum of Art, Raymond James Financial, Holland & Knight and Eric Lang Petersons, among others.

He produces exceptional large-scale mixed media paintings that are unpredictable and thought provoking. Gaston's signature style is layer upon layer of paint, often mixed with nontraditional media elements such as sand or beeswax. He describes his figurative

Above: "UAKTI, King of the Amazon," oil on canvas, 1994



"Clouds of Vincent," mixed media on burlap, 2007

works as "primitive," a word that personifies and distinguishes his work.

A recurrent theme of his paintings features the body as a vessel. The piece can be made up of juxtaposed or overlapping shapes filling or emptying the vessel with the familiar background of layers of textured paint.

Observations from viewers that the figures appear to be falling through space in some of his paintings, and recognizing that galleries and museums like to see works in a series, led Gaston to challenge himself and create his first series several years ago titled "Falling Man."

Regular visitors to local galleries will be familiar with his work. The paintings' "primitive" style keeps the viewer curious while the technique remains flawless.

For the viewer, the paintings appear approachable and spontaneous, but Gaston does not romanticize the creative process or his inspiration.

"I can't just turn it on like a faucet. I start with an exercise: one stroke on the paper, followed by another." He calls the process "warm-ups." "One mark leads to the next; it is almost a Zen thing and it gets the creativity going," he says.

Gaston adds the caveat, "It never works when I try to force it; creativity comes of its own initiative. Some of my best inspiration can come just going into nature, after a walk."

When painting, Gaston doesn't do a lot of preliminary work. "I put it right on canvas when the urge hits. I use different techniques — beeswax, painting on wood or canvas and ink on paper. I sometimes use collage as a basis for the background, but I don't overuse it." ▶

Gaston works on a piece in his Dunedin studio.

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