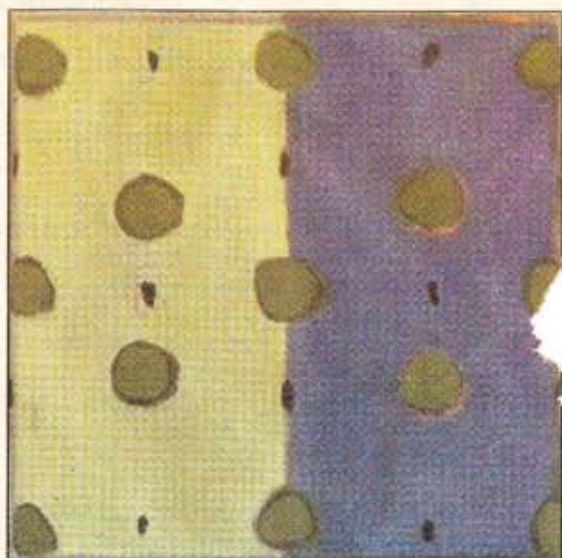


Visual Discoveries



Katharine Kimball/The New Mexican

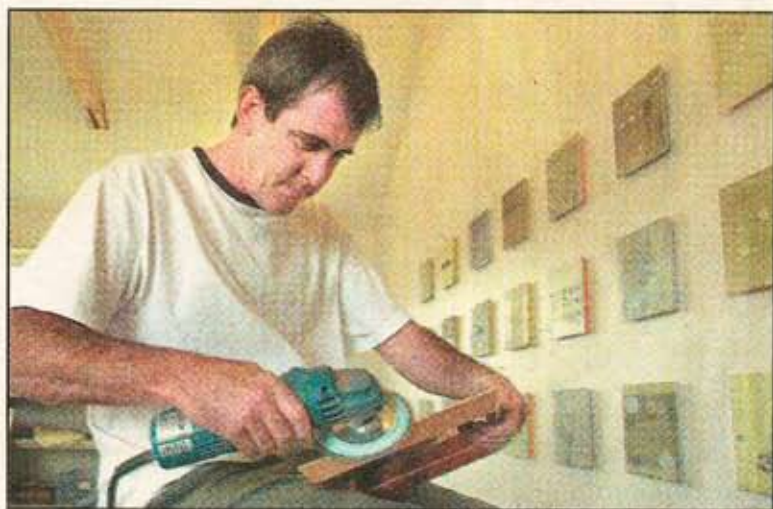
By Teri Thomson Randall
For The New Mexican

Abstract painter Charles Thomas O'Neil hopes the experience of looking at his work is like waking from a dream. Although we draw upon our own stories and sensibilities to explain the images, he said, we never feel we fully arrive at their essential meaning. Even so, our lives are enriched through the attempt.

Narrative Elements, the artist's latest offering of abstract oil paintings on copper, brass and aluminum, opens Saturday, Aug. 18, at Linda Durham Contemporary Art in Galisteo. True to its title, the work offers a visual discourse. It is also a feast for the imagination.

In the last decade O'Neil has developed a fascinating visual vocabulary that includes orbs, hearts, lines, letters, numbers and childlike markings. Many of those elements do have a personal meaning for the artist but are so nonspecific viewers can't help but spontaneously project their own meanings on the work.

While each painting can stand on its own, viewing the installation in its totality is an entirely different experience — similar to the difference between



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Clockwise from top left, '36 K 1165,' oil on metal, 34 inches square; '1180,' oil on metal, 10 inches square; by sanding and polishing, O'Neil brings out hidden elements in his paintings.

reading an excerpt and the novel. In its configuration for the show, a 3-by-9-foot grid of 10-inch-square paintings, O'Neil's work is a symphony of visual motifs and texture within a field of muted earth tones and pastels. The emerging themes and variations work together to create a sense of both innocence and intelligence.

O'Neil finds his forms through trial and error — painting, then sanding down, then painting again — repeating the process as he develops some elements and eradicates others. Through the layered, scratched and rubbed surface, the viewer can detect details from his earlier "drafts." Subtle abstract shapes and forms, words, even math equations playfully emerge and recede as one's focus shifts across the painting. In his catalogue essay, Louis Grachos, director and curator of SITE Santa Fe, wrote that O'Neil's technique exposes the viewer to the history of the painting. The viewer becomes "pry to artistic decisions typically made alone in the studio."

During a recent interview at his spacious studio near Lamy, O'Neil called these ghost images "the hidden pulse behind the painting." The work feels honest and sincere because his process is so transparent, O'Neil said.

Many of O'Neil's paintings contain a playful dialogue between the figure and the background. At times, the background pops forward, competing with the figure for the viewer's attention.

O'Neil describes his approach as "stream of consciousness." He tries to begin each piece with few

preconceived notions instead preferring to paint and respond to whatever evolves. Just as important lessons in life come unexpectedly, he tries to make way for the unexpected in his work.

One of his favorite artists is Canadian/American minimalist painter Agnes Martin, who creates spare, abstract paintings using graphite lines drawn across white, gray or delicately colored canvases. According to O'Neil, Martin once said, "I am painting the wind in the grass." Martin's koan inspires O'Neil and epitomizes his artistic intentions.

"When we look at something of majesty, we sense an equation there that is perfect but we can't understand it," O'Neil said. "When we die, we get to see the matrix. But until then, it remains a question we want to answer. I want to bring this feeling to my paintings. There is a story there that we want to complete but don't know how."

O'Neil is a native of New York, raised in the contemporary art environment of that city. He moved to New Mexico in 1991, after completing his formal art training at Rhode Island School of Design and at Skidmore College in New York. "New Mexico has been very good to me," he said. In addition to finding his voice as an artist, he and wife, Wendy, a silversmith, became parents a year and a half ago. Two dogs and a rabbit with free run of O'Neil's studio complete the family roster.

O'Neil's work is represented in the collections of Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Maine; Hallmark Collection in Kansas City, Mo.; and Smith Barney in New York.

Because O'Neil is reluctant to title his work, he identifies his paintings only by number. "I like to remain anonymous in the dialogue between the viewer and the painting," he said. "A title just adds baggage. I want the viewer to bring his own story, his own experience to the work."

"Just as these paintings were fashioned in a stream of consciousness, I am inviting the viewers to join me in their own streams of consciousness. To lose themselves in the journey." ◀

DETAILS

WHAT
Charles Thomas O'Neil
Paintings

WHEN
Opening reception
2-4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 18
Exhibit through Sept. 22

WHERE
Linda Durham Contemporary Art
12 LaVega, Galisteo

INFO
466-6600