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Opportunity knocks for Oly painter A dream come true: New York show is turning point for local artist Michael Croman

MOLLY GILMORE; Contributing writer | Published December 31, 2010
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A decade ago, Michael Croman of Olympia retired early to devote himself to painting.

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Next month, Croman will be among artists from all over the world featured in a group show at Agora Gallery in New York City.

"It was a goal I set in college," he said. "That would be the final test, to reach the level where I could compete with other artists in New York.

"Things happen in New York like nowhere else."

Croman achieved the goal through a mix of hard work and a lucky accident that led him to his unique painting technique just weeks after he had recommitted himself to art full time.

He paints landscapes in oil, but his technique and the way the paintings look are anything but traditional.

He was using turpentine to soften dried paint so he could rework a section of a landscape painting. "I hit it with the cloth, and I just saw something," he said. The section he'd wanted to rework now had a detailed texture that he liked better than the rest of the painting.

"I woke up at 3 o'clock the next morning and got a fresh canvas and tried to do the same thing again," he said. "I never stopped."

After applying paint to the canvas with a brush, creating the broad outlines of a landscape, he works with turpentine and a cloth to create texture until he likes the result, a process that can take all day.

"If I don't like it, I just keep doing it over and over until I do like it," he said. "I am watching the painting evolve.

"I'm trying to pull out fractal forms," he added. "If I don't go too far, I end up with a very abstract feeling and the feeling of the place."

A press release from Agora describes his work like this: "Croman's materials and methods are more than experimental; they are intensely innovative, breathing a contemporary dynamism into his classic subjects."

His landscapes are at once real and imaginary: The level of detail he creates is more than the eye can perceive in nature, and the places he paints are composites of real places he's visited. One landscape evokes the Southwest, while another is reminiscent of — yet is not — Hurricane Ridge.

He's been creating at least seven paintings a month since his so-called retirement. Although he sells his work regularly, there are hundreds stacked in his bedroom.

He's shown his work in several Western Washington galleries, but many of the ones where his work sold best — including Abstractions Gallery in Olympia — have closed. He's also shown with the International Society of Experimental Artists and will help to host the show this year at GDP Studios in Shelton.

Croman views the New York City show as a road to new opportunities. Even before the show has opened, he's received an invitation to participate in an exhibit in Italy.

"Putting my work into a place as big and powerful as New York is going to generate things I can't anticipate," he said.

"I figured I needed 10 years to prove what I could do if I worked full-time on painting," he said. "I would say it's a total success. I'm delighted with how far I got in 10 years, and the 10th year ends in February."

As does the exhibit at Agora.



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"It's a world of fascination," he said of his work. "It takes energy and time to keep your nose in there. It's much easier to just take a nap." 'The Persistence of Form'

What: Olympia painter Michael Croman's innovative landscape paintings are featured in a group exhibit at a New York City gallery.

When: Jan. 11-Feb. 1, with an opening reception from 6 to 8 p.m. Jan. 13

Where: Agora Gallery, 530 W. 25th St., New York

Tickets: Free

More information: www.agora-gallery.com; www.michaelcroman.com

Locally: Croman's work can be seen by appointment at GDP Studios, 68 S.E. Lynch Road, Shelton. Call 360-870-6619. Or call Croman at 360-866-9542 to schedule a private showing.

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