

The Florida Times-Union

Realist painter Bo Bartlett opens show at MOCA Jacksonville

| June 2023 | By Tom Szaroleta



Bo Bartlett, *Diaspora*, 2016, Oil on linen, 82 x 100 inches, 208.3 x 254 cm

Bo Bartlett has a simple piece of advice for young artists: “Let your roots feed your crown.”

Bartlett, a realist painter who splits time between Georgia and Maine, told a group of UNF art students touring his new show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville that their art should reflect their experiences, their history, their DNA.

“We all have different stories and no story is better than any other story,” Bartlett said while showing the students his new “Earthly Matters” show in MOCA’s third-floor gallery. “What’s important is that we tell our own story.”

Many of the paintings in Bartlett’s show are huge, 8-by-10 feet or larger, most wrapped in thick gold frames that give the impression of looking out a window onto a scene from Bartlett’s memory. One painting is literally that, the view of Columbus, Ga., rooftops that Bartlett saw every day during the pandemic lockdown. Another shows a Maine neighbor with a sledgehammer slung over his shoulder.

Others are more fanciful. In one, a family in a small rowboat gazes at the top of a church spire peeking above floodwaters. Another shows four young people, eyes closed and wearing tin-foil hats.

He said his paintings ask questions, but it's up to the viewer to figure out what that question might be. "The whole thing is to get us to ask the question: What is the question?"

Bartlett's paintings, which have a sort of Norman Rockwell feel, can be appreciated on a personal level, on a sociopolitical level, a historical level or an art-historical level. "You can sort of come in wherever you want," he said.

The paintings typically take about six weeks to complete, but may take years to conceptualize before he ever picks up a brush. One of the works, "Freedom," shows a man riding a bicycle, pulling a small trailer and flying an American flag. The idea started 30 years ago when he saw a guy on a bicycle. Years later, he was in Mexico Beach, Fla., after it had been devastated by a hurricane and saw people pulling everything they could save in wagons. Someone had stuck an American flag in the sand. The three things came together in his head and "Freedom" resulted.



Bo Bartlett, *Freedom*, 2019, Oil on linen, 82 x 100 inches, 208.3 x 254 cm

Bartlett's show will be on display until Sept. 10. Elizabeth Heuer, an art history professor at UNF, will present a lecture on his works from 7-8 p.m. on Wednesday, July 5, as part of the First Wednesday Art Walk.