

Peter Adams: Between the sun and the darkness

Landscape artist who paints the changing light of the West will lecture at the Autry.

January 24, 2014 | By Kirk Silsbee



"Clearing Skies at Sunset" by Peter Adams.... (Courtesy of Peter...)

Artist Peter Adams likes a challenge. He has passions and procedures that make his paintings significantly more difficult than they might otherwise be. Known for his landscapes, Adams often likes to paint in nature, trying to capture a piece of the changing light. That's not terribly unique but as an opera buff, he will sometimes work using theatrically lit studio situations.

"Most artists I know," he explains, "don't know how to work under colored lights. Those lights lose a lot of detail but those unseen elements are what I find fascinating."

He has also painted in a number of caves around the world, moving lights into them and finding interesting rock formations. "The shapes and shadows will sometimes suggest things," says Adams, 64. "In the Mt. Shasta Caves, I thought I saw two figures and a cross. It looked to me like Dante and Virgil descending to the first rung of Hell. Viewers can have their own interpretations, of course."

Though working in the representational mode, he tries to impart intangibles in his work. "If you've ever been in a Greek or Russian Orthodox church," he points out, "the lights are low and there's incense burning — it's very atmospheric. You know there's something there that you can't see, but you don't know what it is."

"It's like Plato's analogy of living in a cave," he clarifies. "All you see are light projections on the back wall. Step outside you're blinded by the sun, but when you go back into the cave, you're sun blind in the darkness. That time of adjustment, when you don't know what you're seeing, is what I love to explore."

Adams will lecture at the Autry National Center's Wells Fargo Theater on Saturday afternoon on that very subject. He calls his talk "Interpreting the Ethereal" and he's excited at the prospect.

"I've never done anything like this," he says, speaking from the American Fine Arts Legacy office in Pasadena. He's thought a lot about the nature of painting and how it relates to the bigger issues of life. "I try to bring a sense of awe and wonder to my paintings, and I'm going to speak about that quality."

The Autry is showing four new Adams landscape pieces in the new "Masters of the American West" show until March 16. Adams is a colorist who wrings out every possible nuance of hue in his work, but his color changes with each setting.

He studied at Otis Art Institute and Art Center College of Designer but in painter Theodore Lukits (1897-1992), Adams found a mentor. "He was a Bohemian," Adams says, "born in Transylvania. I apprenticed with him for seven years and I got a real sense of the breadth of 19th-century European art. Lukits knew many of the great artists, like Alfonse Mucha, of Art Nouveau."

"Whether they were Impressionists, Neo-Classacists, Symbolists or Art Nouveau," he points out, "most of them could work in all the other styles. In 20th-century art, with all of the 'isms,' the artists couldn't get out of their styles. Salvador Dali is the exception."

To enlarge on the point, he says, "Traditional art told stories with a common vocabulary. Modern art doesn't have a vocabulary; Will Durant came up with that."

He grew up in Beverly Hills and the movie industry was always part of his life. "My father was a part-time actor," Adams says, "and my maternal grandfather directed the Andy Hardy movies. King Vidor and Claudette Colbert were family friends."

Adams is concerned about how photography has limited perceptions in latter day pictorial art. "Like everyone else," he concedes, "I'm influenced by cinema and photographs but there are things that the camera can't capture. And artists should be exploring those areas."

What: Peter Adams: "Interpreting the Ethereal"

Where: Wells Fargo Theater, Autry National Center, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles.

When: Saturday, Feb. 1, 2 p.m.

More info: (323) 667-2000

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