

THE ARTS

Visual arts, literature,
theater, music & more

Born to paint

Astoria artist Robert Paulmenn has worked to re-establish his painting skills

By DWIGHT CASWELL

Few artists build a painting like Robert Paulmenn does. His work is exquisitely composed, the colors deep and vibrant. Paulmenn seems to have been born to paint but was sidetracked for many years before returning to art.

Having drawn since childhood, “to occupy myself when I was alone,” Paulmenn decided that the usual college was not for him and went instead to duCret School of Arts in New Jersey. There, he principally studied sculpture, which led to work as a sculptor and mold maker for an amusement park. He then began painting large backdrops, flats and set pieces for musical theater, reinvigorating his interest in painting and requiring further education.

In the 1960s university art programs were dominated, Paulmenn says, “by abstract expressionism and non-realistic painting. They were discarding proven techniques developed over 500 years. That’s not what I wanted.” He moved to New York and enrolled at the Art Students League, one of the premier art schools in the nation since its inception in 1875. He studied with Daniel Green and Harvey Dinnerstein, modern American masters of figurative art,

and Ronald Sherr, arguably the best figurative and portrait painter in the country, became a friend. Paulmenn learned how to build a painting, “from the inside out.”

He next found himself in Lake City, Colorado, altitude 8,700 feet, working as a chef and carpenter. This odyssey may have taken him from painting, but it brought him to a relationship. Writer and poet Mary Lou McAuley, now his wife, came from a small town in Oregon called

Cannon Beach.

The couple left the cold winters of Colorado for Bandon and then Ashland, where they operated restaurants, before moving to Astoria three years ago. Here, Paulmenn says, “I re-established my painting skills. It was a long process.” When he was young he would try anything. Now, years later, “I had to think about the process.”

Paulmenn learned to paint again. “Technique,” he says, “is the easier part. Finding



PHOTOS BY DWIGHT CASWELL

Above: Painter Robert Paulmenn stands next to his oil painting “Reclining Nude” and the painting’s preliminary graphite study at RiverSea Gallery in Astoria.

Top left: This detail of Robert Paulmenn’s painting “Reclining Nude” shows the broken brushwork used that gives an impression of light and delicate shading from farther away.

Left: Artist Robert Paulmenn stands with his painting “Who Are You?” at RiverSea Gallery in Astoria.

LEARN FROM THE ARTIST

Robert Paulmenn teaches an ongoing painting class at Astoria Art Loft, located at 106 Third St., from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturday mornings. Drop-ins are welcome. For further information call 503-325-4442.

what’s the important thing in a painting, what to emphasize or de-emphasize, how to simplify, essentially by eliminating detail — I still have a lot to learn.” The way he describes his process sounds much simpler than it is: “I get an idea, and I work from there. I look at something to see how it balances, and I’m not afraid to make mistakes.”

Paulmenn uses Notan,

a Japanese design theory involving the interplay and placement of light and dark elements in a composition. “A black and white drawing is broken down into simple shapes,” Paulmenn explains. “You can see it clearly, and you go from there. It’s a great tool.”

“Every painting evolves differently,” Paulmenn says, “from different ideas and

subjects, and subject matter can dictate style.”

A painting in his recent show at RiverSea Gallery in Astoria, “Who Are You?,” is of one model painted in three poses, “a different look than originally conceived.” Another painting from that show, “Reclining Nude,” uses broken brushwork to recreate the effect of his graphite study of the subject. The brushwork all but disappears from a few feet away, leaving an impression of light and delicate shading.

“I’m trying different things,” says Robert Paulmenn. “I’m always looking for another way to approach a painting, to make it better.”