



Astoria artist Darren Orange uses a scraper to apply paint to a small canvas in his studio.



Darren Orange's paintings have become less structured and more abstract over the years, but the waterfront and the river remain deep influences. This small painting is similar to his earlier work, with more literal reference to the river.



"Orange on Blue" is a moody body of work in monochromatic blue, black and white.

ORANGE ON BLUE

Astoria artist Darren Orange makes his mark this February with a new art show in the historic John Jacob Astor Hotel

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

Artist Darren Orange is back. Not that he's been away from his Astoria home, but that after a break from his studio he's been creating a storm of new paintings unified by a riverine theme. Almost entirely in shades of blue, white, and black, his new work is characterized, Orange says, "by the cold but bright illumination of subject matter." An exhibition of the work, "Orange on Blue," will take place Feb. 7 to 28 in the dilapidated grandeur of the John Jacob Astor Hotel lobby. Forty new pieces will be displayed in pools of light surrounded by fractured plaster columns and denuded walls.

Raised on an apple orchard in Yakima, Washington, Orange received a degree in fine arts from Western Washington University before moving to Astoria for its location on the Columbia River and for the community he found. He set up a studio on the second floor of what was once an office building on Commercial Street, and began to paint. That was some 15 years ago.

Orange doesn't paint nonstop. It's not unusual for him to abandon the studio for a time; he took all of last summer off. "I typically work in bursts," he says, "and then take time off to fill the tank. It's important; you have to have something to work with."

Orange's paintings have become progressively less structured over the years, but the waterfront and the river remain deep influences. His work is both intellectual and emotional. His paintings are thought through, and then he paints with abandon.

"Orange on Blue," he says, represents "a natural progression of my work to the less

literal. They are more heavily influenced by intuition and the automatic than in the past." By this he means that the paintings are "like jazz, free-form and not referencing the literal interpretation of landscape."

Push Orange a little further and he will admit that what lies behind the theory is fun, the unpretentious enjoyment of and absorp-

tion in the act of creation: "This particular body of work was inspired by movement of pigment; it's as simple as that. I'm just playing, being free, with no preconceptions about outcome."

Taken as a whole, this exhibition is also a meditation on the Columbia River, and as Orange says, "It's about mood; it's not lit-



Darren Orange continues to explore reflection and abstraction of the natural environment in his new series of oil paintings, "Orange on Blue," on display in the lobby of the historic John Jacob Astor Hotel this February.



Both large and small format works, such as this painting, will be presented in "Orange on Blue."

eral." Our river isn't blue, but the paintings are, of course, about the color blue. "I've found a color I'm interested in working with," he says. "It's the same blue you find in the horizon and distant hills."

His intimate involvement with color and the meditative improvisation of the process of painting itself is evident as he works on a canvas. Brushes have been eliminated from his process, replaced by scrapers of various sizes and shapes. With small paintings he huddles close to the work, moving paint around the canvas with a small scraper, experimenting with flow and texture. With large format paintings — there are eight in the show — paint is scraped on and off the canvas in bold strokes. He says the technique, "is not new to me; it's something I've revisited."

Orange compares the way he paints today to that of the abstract expressionists, an approach that evolved in America during and immediately after World War II in the work of artists like Hans Hofman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, among others. "It's very much intuitive mark-making, a game of moves played like aesthetic chess, placing the marks in an aesthetically pleasing way. Not every move is correct, but it's easy enough to paint over. I have no idea of the end result. I'm just mark-making."

The paintings of Darren Orange are not as simple as that sounds. In many of the smaller paintings remnants of literal drawings—and the man can draw—are surrounded by bright yet lyrical swirls of paint that

'Orange on Blue'

Sponsored in part by Street 14 Coffee, this art show is on view from 2 to 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday, Feb. 7 to 28 at the John Jacob Astor Hotel, 1421A Commercial St. After-hours events featuring other forms of aesthetic experience will follow in the evening. Appointments for viewing at other times may be arranged. "Be sexy and bring a coat," says Orange; the cavernous John Jacob Astor Hotel lobby is unheated.

EVENT LINE UP

Artist Reception, 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 7. Check out the opening of the art show; enjoy music by guitarist Jeff Trapp.

Interactive Soundscape, 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday Feb. 14. This interactive sound installation is brought to you by Derek Ecklund, Roger Hayes, and Portland artists Christi Denton, Heather Perkins and Jesse Mejia.

DJ Ali Aht, 8 to 10 p.m. Friday, Feb. 20. Enjoy a night of minimal and techno house music by DJ Ali Aht, who has shared bills with the like of DJ Andy Smith, Donald Glaude, and Sterling Moss of Planet Techno.

Belly dance and music, 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 21. Jessamyn Grace will perform the art of belly dance. Songwriter and poet Dusty Santamaria plays American roots music.

Parallel Lines and Kathryn Claire, 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28. Astoria indie-rock band Parallel Lines features Daric Moore, Jordan Okoniewski, Mike Morrow and Brandon Bowers. Kathryn Claire will also perform with friends Ara and Chris.



Darren Orange, left, discusses how he will hang his paintings inside the John Jacob Astor Hotel lobby with Paul Caruana, who co-owns the building with his business partner, Brian Faherty.

evoke the river. The larger canvasses are more abstract, flooded with light and color, form and shadow that evoke structures, water, fog, the meetings of river, land and air.

Orange's paintings change and evolve, move back and forth between literal and abstract, gradually becoming more abstract as his work matures. One thing, however, does not change: "Where I'm at completely informs me. The area permeates my psyche... where I'm at always comes out in my work."

'I'm just playing, being free, with no preconceptions about outcome.'