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SUBMITTED PHOTO

A Koutsouras painting of the Uppertown net shed

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Koutsouras' art had been largely figurative, but today he draws inspiration from the river, sky and structures of his adopted home.

For the Imogen show, Koutsouras focuses on one iconic Astoria structure: the Uppertown net shed familiarly known as "Big Red." He said he is "very close and personal with the space and my friends and Astoria and its history." His work in this exhibit is about the transformations of people and structures as much as it is about location. "I sense the spirit of the place as it evolves and changes in time," he said.

'Emotionally alive'

Since Koutsouras moved to Astoria, he has experienced the death of his father, the passing of friends, the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. "It caused me to question my life, what I was doing," he said.

Koutsouras puts all of this living into his paintings. They are emotionally alive. The late Royal Nebeker, who had his studio in Big Red, said of Koutsouras' work: "When contemplating one of his large panoramic



ABOVE: Koutsouras' "The Artist's Studio," oil on canvas
RIGHT: "Adrift," mixed media on wood, by Christos Koutsouras

paintings, one becomes aware of a different kind of narrative. I am referring to his representation of a nature at once vast and profoundly personal."

Koutsouras is as passionate about the arts as he is personal about his painting. But he's not above playing with art history as well. One of his pieces is titled "The Night Watch," a painting of the night but that has little to do with Rembrandt. Another is "The Scream," which features the net shed in its ruined glory as a small part of the canvas, surrounded by abstract lines and forms that all but vibrate.

"We have to take responsibility for our physical environment," the artist said. "Sometimes even structures need to scream."

Koutsouras believes that "we have to get away from the idea that art is a luxury." As a recent study by the Arts Council of Clatsop County established, the arts have transformed Astoria.

"It is not the same city as when I came here," Koutsouras said. "The town is thriving, and our work is important to the town, but we don't do anything for the artists. We have to work on the collective consciousness to bring about more appreciation for the arts. If you are talking about elevating a place, aesthetics is important."

A spirit of creativity has long enlivened Astoria, and Koutsouras believes the town, is "missing a place dedicated only to the arts, a focal point for music, work spaces and galleries. It would bring people from far away. It needs to be done."

His candidate for that role? Big Red. 