



Roberta C. Nelson

BEST REASON TO CROSS THE SKYWAY

What: Folk art and North Carolina pottery exhibits at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg
Why: Take time to go across the Skyway Bridge to visit this outstanding fine arts museum before these two exhibits leave in early July, made by self-taught artists and Southeast artisans.
Roberta, features staff writer, loves beautiful objects, including ones she made herself.

Only the sky's the limit with this exhibit

Painting the Great Outdoors is an old art. The Chinese were doing it some 12 centuries ago. European artists first considered nature as their main idea in the 16th century, when Pieter Breughel described winter in "The Hunters in the Snow." And if you overlook the figure in Leonardo's 15th century portrait "Mona Lisa," the misty lake, jagged mountains and winding river in the background make one heck of a landscape.

America's earliest landscape paintings were topographical records made by artists who joined explorers on their journeys into the wilderness. But by the look of the scenery in the local current exhibit "It's Outside," you'd never think that we came late to the genre. In fact, your first reaction might be a feeling of deliverance from our made-made world.

You see mostly cloud-swept sky pictures, and what you get are visual strolls through the earth's most uncultivated spaces. Oh, what a relief it is. One minute you get a smooth and silent sky. The next thing you know, the sky gathers up its clouds — the dark and woolly ones, and those that are silken with delicate grays — and puts on a show. And it's liable to hit you that these artists are not painting landscapes, but rather the firmaments of their mind.

Their clouds suggest other things, too. You have only to let your imagination loose, the way fiction writers do. I'm thinking of Joseph Conrad seeing animals in "Karain: A Memory": "Ragged edges of black clouds peeped over the hills, and invisible thunderstorms circled outside, growing like wild beasts." Or John Updike seeing plantlife in "The Witches of Eastwick": "At the base of this cliff of atmosphere, cumulous clouds, moments ago as innocuous as flowers afloat in a pond, had begun to boil."

Grace Mitchell

Mitchell acknowledges the link between her work and literature by titling a good number of her pictures with allusions to Dante's *Inferno*. "The world is lost," she says, "and art can save it with beauty and awe."

To get an idea of what Mitchell's work looks like, think of the meditative and even hypnotic mood in Mark



PHOTO PROVIDED

Zaria Forman captures dramatic cloud formations. See this piece and others on display at the "It's Outside" exhibit at the Allyn Gallup Contemporary in Sarasota.

SKETCHBOOK



Joan Altabe |

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Rothko's abstract expressionist paintings. Like Rothko, Mitchell blurs edges to lend an amorphous quality. Without defined borders, her skies appear to hover, making their place in the world ambiguous.

And, as she ponders the "inconvenient truth," or as she puts it "the devastation of the land by human beings reaching epidemic proportions," Mitchell concludes, "One cannot consider painting perfectly 'pretty' landscapes, or even grand and heroic landscapes."

Not that she doesn't work hard at

her landscapes.

"They take a long time to accomplish," she said, "but the thin glazes are delicate, as some feel the earth to be, and the art must be handled with care. However, the impact is strong and enduring, as the earth ultimately is, whether we survive our treatment of it or not."

No azure world, here, that's for sure, but Mitchell's work is upbeat just the same.

Zaria Forman

Only a recent college graduate, Zaria captures dramatic cloud formations as if she's been at it since landscape painting began. Limiting her palette to black and white charcoal and chalk, she conjures up the art of Florida photographer Clyde Butcher, aka "Ansel Adams of the Everglades," who famously said, "I don't consider color photography art. Black and white is an interpretation. Color is a duplication."

Zaria's rationale for her palette is her own: "Throughout my childhood, my family traveled all over the world

to remote landscapes . . . Early on, I developed an appreciation for the beauty of the ever-changing sky. I loved watching a far off storm on the western desert planes, the monsoon rains of southern India, and the cloudless skies over the Sahara desert. In my work, I explore moments of transition, turbulence and tranquility in the landscape and their impact on the viewer. In this process I am reminded of how small we are when confronted with the vastness and powerful forces of nature. When I am drawing, I often enter into a meditative state as though my head is 'in the clouds.' My hope is that the viewer can share this experience of tranquil escape when engaging the work."

What's next? "I am quite eager to explore jellyfish," she said. "Their beauty and luminescence intrigues me."

Given her way with clouds, I can't wait.

"It's Outside," through July 26 at Allyn Gallup Contemporary, 556 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota. Information: 366 2093.

Linda Ohlson Graham

A member of the Sarasota Pen Women, Graham does skies with her camera rather than a brush. Which might set you to think of Ansel Adams and his silvery light and rising shadows vying for possession of the night in "Moon and Half Dome, Yosemite National Park."

But that's not it. Think J.M.W. Turner, the English landscape painter who was credited as forerunner of Impressionism for dissolving natural scenery in hazy color, and you've got Graham's work.

And no wonder. Graham once co-directed the Turner Museum in Denver, Colo. "Co-directing the Turner Museum changed my life forever," she said. "I loved the way Turner captured light, and I so enjoy his big sky images."

We can tell, Linda, we can tell.

Check out the Sarasota Pen Women Web site to see Graham's portfolio: www.nlapw-sarasota.com.

Joan Altabe, a local writer and arts and architecture expert, appears Thursdays in the Herald.