THE PANTAGRAPH

Master in our midst: Gregor predated an art movement

By DAVID PROEBER MAR. 22, 2015

Harold Gregor takes in two works that represent bookends in his career. The aerial view of an idealized golf course was finished last November, while the massive weight of an Allis Chalmers combine was painted early in his career, around 1973. The works hang in his painting studio in downtown Bloomington

BLOOMINGTON – At 85 years young, Harold Gregor cannot afford to sit back and fade away into retirement.

After all, the retired Illinois State University professor has two exhibitions coming up at prestigious Midwest galleries and he knows he'd better start swinging his brush. He's got a lot of paintings in the works.

Gregor's career spans more than 50 years. His works are hanging at the White House and galleries in Chicago and New York. Yet you've probably run into Gregor on a casual walk in downtown Bloomington as he arrives at work at his gallery at 311 N. Main Street.

Born in Detroit in 1929, during the middle of the Great Depression, Gregor remembers a day in his first-grade classroom that probably launched his fierce determination to make a life for himself in the arts.

"It was a bad time," Gregor said. "The school systems were feeling the pinch of the Great Depression. Paper and pens and ink were in very short supply."

Drawing paper, he said, was rationed to no more than two sheets per student per day.

"I had gotten it in my head that I needed to use three sheets one day and I got in very serious trouble," he said. "The teacher made me stand in the corner.

"It could have been the end to my interest in art," he said. "Instead, I said, 'I'm not got to let that blankety-blank-blank teacher do that to me'."

The spark was lit, and it's been blazing since.

As Gregor drew and painted through elementary school he decided he wanted to win an award offered by the Detroit News.

"It was a lot like The Pantagraph's Flying Horse," he said. "You entered 15 drawings over as many weeks, and a winner would be picked and given an award."

"After weeks of drawing and entering the contest, no one from the newspaper contacted me," he said.

"I didn't let that stop me," he said. "I kept entering from fourth through eighth grade, and then finally, as I was about to graduate from grade school, I was told that I had earned more points than anyone could remember."

Bloomington artist Harold Gregor is still painting and is preparing for shows at galleries in Milwaukee and Chicago.

Gregor was invited to the Detroit News for lunch and given an award. It was the fire he needed to keep him going and enroll in Wayne State University, where he received his bachelor's degree, and Michigan State, where he received his master's in painting and ceramics.

Gregor began to make contact with very influential figures in the art world while at Michigan State. Abstract Expressionism was the rage of the day and Jackson Pollock's drip paintings had turned the art world on its ear.

"Pollock's brother, Charles, happened to be one of my art professors at Michigan State and we would hear daily updates on Jackson's career," he said.

"Something troubling began to emerge in the stories," he said. "It became apparent that Jackson didn't know what to do after the drip art."

"He said something to the effect, 'I've done all the drips I can drip'."

As the later years of the Korean War raged, Gregor's art career was put on hold when the U.S. Army sent him to Europe to work on radar units. After returning from the Army, Gregor was feeling lost as an artist. He took a job at Chrysler as a clay modeler and worked on the Imperial for three years.

"I was well paid," he said, "But I, like every other artist in the department, didn't feel they were getting anywhere with our art careers."

Gregor concluded that art school hadn't taught him how to be an artist. He enrolled in Ohio State University to pursue a doctorate in painting and art history.

"It was both theoretical and practical," he said. "We had lots of studio time to work on our art and also a number of famous artists who taught us how to survive as an artist."

After Ohio State, Gregor received teaching positions at San Diego State College, Purdue and eventually was recruited to be department head at Chapman University in California. It was while living and teaching in southern California that Gregor met and worked with many of the influential artists of the early 1970s, including internationally exhibited artist and theoretician John Baldessari.

Gregor's several brushes with greatness did little for his painting, though. His style drifted from late Abstract Expressionism to '60s pop, even including painting figures for a while similar in style to Willem de Kooning.

Gregor's return to realism occurred when he was offered a position to oversee the Ph.D. candidate's program in the art department at Illinois State University in 1970. It was at this time he began painting corn cribs and other realistic paintings of the Illinois prairiescape.

Harold Gregor's Illinois Landscape No. 120, painted in 1992, hangs in the White House as Vice President Joe Biden, Sen. Dick

“I entered a painting in the Evansville, Ind., Realism Show and won the grand prize of $1,000,” he said. “That was a lot of money in those days.”

His success at realism was at first a conflict with his modernist education, but “I fell back on an old art saying of the time: ‘Realism, like the poor, will always be with us.”

Gregor’s realistic prairie scenes were different at the time. So different, in fact, that Nancy Lurie Gallery in Chicago and Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York wanted to show his work.

“Tibor offered me a show in 1978 and everything sold,” he said. “There were little red dots on the walls (indicating sold works) everywhere like the gallery had measles.”

Gregor had predated the success of modern realism. The works of the photo-realism school were just beginning to come to the forefront of modern art as artists had finally exhausted Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

Illinois State became a fertile place for creative thought in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Gregor worked and taught alongside fellow painters Harold Boyd and Ken Holder. The group is sometimes referred to as the "Heartland Painters."

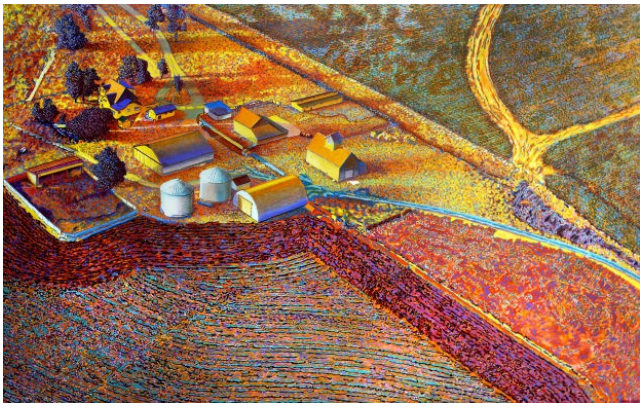
After the deaths of de Nagy in 1993 and Lurie in 1999, Gregor was picked up by Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago, ACA Gallery in New York, Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe and Tory Folliard Gallery in Milwaukee. He operates his own gallery, managed by his wife, Marlene. The couple married in 1986 and Gregor credits her with allowing him the privilege to paint without worrying about Internet presence and social media.

"She handles all that," he said. "I wouldn't be where I am without her."

Gregor’s work is in museums and private collections around the United States and has even found temporary placement in the White House and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

When asked what art historians 100 years from now might think of his work, Gregor laughed.

“They’re going to ask, ‘Did that guy ever make up his mind?’”



Flatscape #83, a 2005 painting by Harold Gregor, was on display at the Russian embassy. The piece is based on color and relationships that begin with aerial photographs. The painting is on display at Gregor's gallery in downtown Bloomington.

And that question is really what gets at the heart of Gregor’s art.

Unlike every successful artist of his generation, Gregor’s art can’t be pigeonholed.

At 85, he stylistically floats between photo-realism, impressionism and even some forgotten styles from mid-1800 European post-Impressionism. You can look at a Gregor painting, and you know you are looking at a Gregor painting, whatever the style.

“I know the theory behind each of those approaches, so why not paint like that?” he asks.

After photo-realism, Gregor’s two most

recognizable styles are paintings he calls flatscapes and vibrascapes. Flatscapes, the result of color-loaded paintings inspired by aerial photographs, use extreme false colors to construct a believable scene of rural America from the air. Vibrascapes, on the other hand, are landscapes of traditional perspective that are painted in intense, highly saturated colors.

The fact that an artist can get away with stylistic diversions like this violates a lot of rules of modern-day art commerce. For Gregor, it's no big deal.

"They sell," he said.

And that's a pretty good piece of advice he wants to pass on to up-and-coming artists.

"Art is about dedication," he said. "Today, you've got to take your art to New York and compete with thousands of other artists who want to sell their art."

"Whatever you paint, you have to believe in it and take it to the galleries and get them to show it."

In a city with hundreds of galleries, "you're only likely to find 10 who will even take an interest in your style," he said.

"You've got to be selective, go to their openings and get to know their artists and hopefully, if your work isn't too much like theirs they'll take you under their wing and introduce you to the gallery owner."