

Fire-Proofed

ALLISON ALSUP | SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE

Aug. 19, 2015



Advocate staff photo by SHERRI MILLER -- Works in 'Painting with Fire' are inspired by classical music. Viewers can hear some of the compositions via mobile device.

It would be an understatement to say classical music informs the 22 works in the Ogden Museum of Southern Art's exhibit of Betsy Eby's paintings.

"Betsy Eby: Painting with Fire"

WHEN: Through Sept. 20

WHERE: Ogden Museum of Southern Art

925 Camp St., New Orleans

INFO: (504) 539-9650

Indeed, one could go so far as to say the artist's works are visual interpretations or "tone poems" of specific musical compositions.

A classically trained pianist, Eby has been playing since the age of 5. More than four decades later, she continues to study seriously under master musicians.

In producing her paintings, Eby says, she plays and listens to a piece of music over and over until she finds its movement and sweep, cadences and arcs. She then translates these rhythms onto the canvas.

Looking at the collection, viewers are struck with a sense of suspended motion barely contained within the boundaries of the composition. In the absence of hard edges or straight lines, the soft organic shapes and curves, often reminiscent of a flock of birds or a cluster of blossoms, appear perched to fly or flicker off the canvas



Photo provided by the artist -- Betsy Eby's 'Metamorphosen.'

However, [“Painting with Fire”](#) takes the interplay of music and painting beyond simply acknowledging the classical works that have shaped each canvas. For several of the pieces, such as “Metamorphosen,” viewers can scan the accompanying information card with their mobile devices and hear the Strauss composition that inspired the painting. The dual visual and auditory experience is a first for [the Ogden](#). The exhibit’s title references the artist’s technique: encaustic painting, an ancient form that involves applying melted layers of pigmented wax and sealing each layer with fire. In Eby’s case, this means passing a blowtorch over the surface, leaving a delicate, almost edible-looking sheen over the canvas.

The resulting works evidence depth as earlier layers appear to recede into foggy backgrounds while brighter upper layers appear to rise, an effect enhanced by dabs of surface paint that create punctuated moments of rough texture.

Eby, along with her husband, the acclaimed realist figure painter [Bo Bartlett](#), divides her time between Columbus, Georgia, and a small island off Maine's midcoast.

She said her aesthetic is shaped by the Oregon landscape of her childhood, a misty atmosphere of pale grays and whites, and foggy, blurred edges.

Later experiences in Japan revealed the importance of restraint and intentionality as well as the effect of white space. An admirer of [Japanese gardens](#), Eby seeks to apply the same alternating dynamic of meandering and focal point to her paintings.



Photo provided by the artist -- The Finger Exercise paintings refer to piano practice and the application of black ink.

More recently, Eby and Bartlett moved to Georgia, where eight months a year she paints in a former cotton mill, a vast space with floor-to-ceiling windows.

“I moved to the South for the light,” she said.

Asked how her new location has affected her work, Eby says the South is a land of sharper contrasts — atmospherically, socially, politically — than her Northwest roots. “I’ve become more aware of the edges of things,” she says.

The two latest paintings in the exhibit, both based on the work of [Czech composer Antonin Dvorak](#) and produced just last year in Eby’s Georgia studio, demonstrate that shift in light and contrast.

With thunderously dark gray backgrounds and lighter tones popping along the surface, the two Dvorak-based pieces feel the most emotionally charged of the exhibit’s works — intensely moody rather than serene, slightly less Japanese in their aesthetic than European.



Photo provided by the artist -- Czech composer Antonin Dvorak was the inspiration for this dark piece, 'Second Variation on a Dvorak Tone Poem.'

Also included are two series featuring smaller works whose shapes and monotoes represent a departure from Eby's signature forms and palette: the "Sanguine" series, painted with string coated in red dry pigment, and the cellular-looking black and white "Finger Exercise" series, whose title, like the exhibit itself, reveals the interplay between music and Eby's technique, here referring to both piano practice and her finger-and-stick application of Sumi ink to the canvas.



Advocate staff photo by SHERRI MILLER -- At the Ogden, paintings by Betsy Eby will be on display through the summer.



Photo courtesy of the artist -- From Betsy Eby's Sanguine series, painted with string coated in red pigment.