

Michael Bell's cinematic art

Lyco alumnus has two art exhibitions in city

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By DAVID WHITMAN - Sun-Gazette Correspondent , Williamsport Sun-Gazette



At the age of 5, Michael Bell won first place in the first juried art exhibition he ever entered. As an emerging young artist, he spent a lot of his time in and around New York City, studying art with his maternal grandmother, Violet Vallery, a self-taught artist.

As much as he liked art, Bell also possessed some serious skills on the hard court. Filled with visions of future "Final Four" glories, he headed down south to Carolina on a basketball scholarship for the chance to fulfill his hoop dreams. Once there, living that dream, Bell realized it was really an illusion.

After a semester in Carolina, the artist missed doing his art so much that he wanted to transfer someplace that had a decent art program to further his talents. "My grandmother found Lycoming in an advertisement," Bell said. "The family was ultra-supportive and so we visited; I fell in love with the campus and was fortunate to be able to transfer."

Bell loved it at Lycoming. He was impressed by the professors and although they all had a great influence on his art career, one in particular stood out - Roger Shipley.

"Roger was a blessing to me," Bell said. "He was a total inspiration to my being able to take creative risks and kept urging me to keep going with the cutting edge narratives I was exploring within my works."

He made lasting connections while attending Lycoming.

"I ended up rooming with Tommy Navarro from Williamsport," Bell said. "His grandfather owned the Triangle Tavern at the time and Tommy also worked as a bouncer at The Pub. He introduced me to everybody. Some weekends, we'd have Sunday dinners at his house or we'd eat out down at the Triangle while everybody else on campus was eating dorm food. It was just like being back home."

As a student at Lycoming, he also made a lot of his friends from Williamsport who either worked at or whose families owned a lot of the bars and restaurants in town, including Louie Miele, who runs MIELE Amusements, Inc. on Third Street.

"Louie ended up being best man at my wedding and two other guys I used to hang with from Williamsport (Mike Neyhart and Matt Harvey) ended up becoming roommates of mine in Manhattan," Bell said. "So, Williamsport was good to me on many levels."

Today, Bell is a renowned American artist, most famous for his thematic gangster series paintings and an infamous portrait painting clientele, which includes the late John Gotti and numerous actors from The "Sopranos," "Goodfellas," "A Bronx Tale" and more. His style is distinctively cinematic.

"I'm like a method actor with my art," Bell said. "I only like to paint what I know, what I've experienced and is real to me. That leads me to the subject matter in a lot of my paintings. I also love to write - a lot of my early work was based on poems I had written."



Aside from one group show in 1998 at Lycoming, Bell has not shown in Williamsport. So, when Lynn Estomin, a professor of art at Lycoming, asked Bell to consider submitting work for a juried alumni show, he immediately accepted.

"She's a phenomenal professor in her own right," Bells said. "We both share a passion for creating art that helps domestic violence causes, so, Lynn is near and dear to my heart. After my '6 under 40' article came out in the Lycoming Magazine to celebrate their 200-year anniversary she urged me to submit. I gladly did."

Two of his new large format "Carnevale Italiano" series paintings were chosen for the show by a panel of judges. Lightning struck twice for Bell because a few days later, the artist was offered another opportunity to show his art locally.

"Upon hearing I was going to participate in a group show at Lycoming, I was contacted by the house manager at the CAC, Jill Woodhead, about the possibility of doing a solo show featuring my "Ticket to Ride" painting series for the same exhibition time period (today through Oct. 21st) as the Lycoming show," Bell said. This solo show at CAC is his first in Williamsport and the first time ever the artist's entire "Ticket to Ride" series has been exhibited for the public.

The "Ticket to Ride" series at the CAC is based on a screenplay Bell has just finished bearing the same title. "It's a roller coaster ride of twisted events that starts and ends with a woman on a New York City subway train," he said.

Bell's creative process is like that of a writer, in that it usually begins with a storyline. Something he either wants to explore visually to learn more about on a personal level or something he'd like to learn more about by re-creating it visually.

He begins by using live models whenever possible, either sketching them first from life and-or photographing them for his paintings in order to inject some of that "experience" into the pieces he paints. Then, "I stretch my own canvases the size and format that makes the most sense with the theme," he said.

For example, his "Ticket to Ride" paintings for the CAC are all squares, 5-feet-by-5-feet large squares to represent being "boxed in" to a certain situation.

"My two 'Carnevale Italiano' paintings for the Lycoming show are 4 feet by 8 feet, more cinematic." Bell said. "Plus, they're in a series that is a prequel series to my 'Ticket to Ride' paintings."

He "blocks in" his paintings using colors like burnt sienna and venetian reds to start, working very thin. From there, he builds up the surface of the painting in oils using thin layers to create an illuminating glow to the works-in the spirit of a Da Vinci or Rembrandt.

"Towards the end, I always find a place for my 'signature drips' within each piece and when I feel I can't go any further with the piece - when it says all I wanted to say and when I become the audience - then I know it's done and I sign it, varnish it and sell it," Bell said.

"Boulevard of Broken Queens" is a great example of Bell's distinctive style. He used Dominic Capone as the model for the guy standing on Queens Boulevard that is slowly transforming into a Coney Island Carnival from the late '70s. Dominic is also Al Capone's great nephew, so he also has some great stories to share with Bell that the artist injected into the piece and storyline.

"I met Dominic when doing a 'Golden Age of Gangsters' show in Chicago," Bell said. "We hit it off, became close friends and he came to visit my studio so I could photograph him for my new painting series."

In addition to his prolific art career, Bell also is the art department chair at both Southern High School and lead art instructor for the Anne Arundel County Gifted Visual Arts Program in Maryland,

where he is in charge of creating an intensive college level portfolio development program to 35 of the best student artists county-wide. In the past two years, he's produced two national award-winners in art and last year alone, his students earned more than 2 million 47 thousand dollars in scholarships.

Once he finishes the "Carnevale Italiano" series, Bell would like to exhibit it in its entirety someplace next - either in New York or Chicago - and then he's going to revisit some new material and work a little smaller for a while. More writing is on the agenda too.

"I have three books I'm in the process of writing - one is about how to unlock your creative process over the course of 31 nights, another is about "Ticket to Ride" and the third about my career in arts education," Bell said. "I'm going to seek out publishers actively once they're completed."

The indefatigable artist is looking forward to his Williamsport return next month.

"Come out to Lycoming Friday, Oct. 14th at 2 p.m. for my artist's talk," Bell said. "Stick around for the group reception at 4:30, then follow me over to the Community Arts Center from 6 to 8 for my 'Ticket to Ride' reception."

For more information about the artist, visit MBELLART.com.

The Lycoming College Art Department's juried alumni show will run until Oct. 21 in Snowden Library. Bell's "Ticket To Ride" series is on display at the Community Arts Center through Oct. 21.

