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arts

A Portrait of the Artist Pittsford's Bob Hooker Paints Abstracts with Texture

BY BOB WOLFF

Some come to Vermont for the mountains or snow, others for the villages, summers, and some for the quiet. Having been here year-round for two and a half years, I stay here mostly for the people whose look or demeanor seems more often than not to cover rich, unique interests and talents. Bob Hooker of Pittsford is a good example. He is an eleventh-generation Vermonter. Beyond that he is impossible to define in a few words.

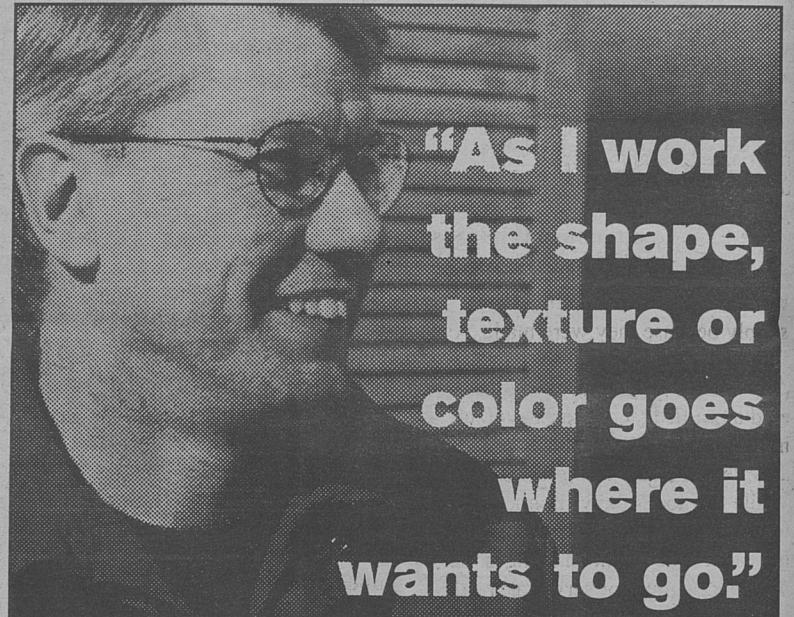
I visited Bob Hooker because he is not only an IBM microchip factory worker but an artist. He has had two shows, the latest of which recently closed at the Maclure Library in Pittsford. Having missed the exhibition, I wanted to see his work and meet the Vermont artist. Bob is what one could call a primitive abstract impressionist – rare in any state, ultra rare in a state where realistic mountain, farm, and house painters abound – but completely rational given how Bob got to be the artist he is. He says, "Painting is the world inside a frame; I love to see what people can do with that and what I can do with that."

Bob lives with his husband, Greg Sharrow, in a building that started its life as a factory in another location in the 1830s. Hooker represents the third generation of his family to live in what is now a home woven with late 19th century machine-shop belt drives, joists singed in the building's previous fires, and a few belt-driven tools and wonderful artifacts representing many times and places. Ritual and theatre masks hang next to 1950s wood, plastic and metal table lamps. A Tibetan prayer gong is adjacent to a string sculpture. Bob explained that only since he and Greg have lived here did anyone occupy the ground floor. Before that his grandmother lived upstairs, and the ground floor was a first a blacksmith shop, then a combination blacksmith and car mechanic's shop. It was finally a car mechanic's garage, an evolution that parallels the history of transportation in America.

The presence of all these

objects is not surprising because Bob, currently in his twenty-eighth year at IBM, is the descendent of blacksmiths and mechanics, and Greg is the Director of Education at Vermont Folk life Center. The mixture of old machines, pets of several phyla, and lighting fixtures of different places and times seems to fit into the world of blacksmith descendants and folk-interested gay men. I should know, as the grandson of a blacksmith, lover

drawing. Instead of the natural and formal art-training approach of moving through drawing to painting, Bob sees textures, shapes and colors that he wants to express, takes notes, and makes little sketches in a notebook. Then later, in his studio (once one of his daughters' bedrooms) he develops these preliminary materials into paintings. Sometimes he works on a painting for months, doing a bit to it every once in a while until he is



"As I work the shape, texture or color goes where it wants to go."

of string band music from different countries, and collector of the odd and interesting.

No Grandma Moses houses and figures in Bob's art. He is into bold abstract images sometimes created with paint, other times with collage – including attachment of 3-D objects. Sometimes these objects are recycled materials found in parking lots and other public places needing tidying up. His mother-in-law, Marjorie Sharrow of Rutland, has been an artist of merit in her own right for almost 70 years. She has attempted to teach him some aspects of figurative if not realistic painting. He declined. She did not think people would be interested in Hooker's abstractions. But instead, as he gained favor among lovers of his abstract works, she has tested the abstract waters herself.

Bob Hooker, 53, has been painting since he was 12, when his mother started him on paint-by-numbers. This process led him away from

satisfied.

"I love texture, shape and colors," he says. "So I put that into my work and love what I am doing, and I love it when others love it too. I start from an idea from the world around me. I take notes in other people's homes, at work, and outside. Then as I work the shape, texture or color goes where it wants to go."

Asked about other painters who have influenced him, Bob mentions Helen Frankenthaler, Edward Betts, Picasso, and Salvador Dali. Hooker's first exhibition was at the Brownell Library in Essex Junction while he was working there as a janitor; the library liked the idea of their janitor as artist. The recent show at the Maclure Library in Pittsford included 39 paintings and collages, representing work over the years. Although sometimes Bob paints several paintings that develop a single theme, most of his paintings follow their own separate paths.

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