

Serpents & the Sea

Artist Is Inspired by Memories of Snakes and Boats

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Nothing left a more lingering effect on Robert Stackhouse's memory than his times as a child catching fish and boating among the wildlife at Lundy's Fish Camp by Lake Juliana in Auburndale.

While there, Stackhouse said he spent the time immersed in the untamed fields, chasing alligators and running away from slithering snakes to avoid getting bitten, as any adventurous, curious child in such an environment would.

"I was the only child there, so to speak, and felt I had to occupy my time," said Stackhouse, 65, who now lives in St. Petersburg. "Encounters with these animals were a daily part of my life.

They were part of my after-school activities. It was quite a rich lifestyle."

It's no surprise then that the Polk Museum of Art exhibit "Robert Stackhouse: Swimmers and Floaters" features art from the 1960 Auburndale High School graduate rich with snake and boating imagery.

"The actual boats and snakes aren't necessarily why I make art with them," said Stackhouse. "They're biblical and have so many different meanings. They're fun, and I'm attracted to drawing them. There's also a fear factor in both, being as you never know how sound a boat can be, and snakes can always sneak up on you."

The exhibit, which opens today, features 23 pieces, including watercolor paintings and sculptures featuring an array of actual "swimmers and floaters."

The 30-year retrospective exhibit - organized by Polk Museum of Art with the John and Maxine Belger Family Foundation in Kansas City, Mo. - traces the roots of some of Stackhouse's best-known works featuring boats and snakes, images the artist said have taken a different turn in his art throughout the years.

The show is also part of a Tampa Bay-wide celebration of Stackhouse's impact as an artist, with the prints show "Robert Stackhouse: Editions Archive" being presented at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum from Jan. 11 to Feb. 23. A Jan. 18 through Feb. 24 installation at the Arts Center in St. Petersburg features an artistic partnership between the artist and his wife, "Waves of Meaning: Robert Stackhouse & Carol Mickett."



Todd Behrens, curator of art at the Polk Museum of Art, said the museum is excited to showcase the work of one of Polk County's most world-renowned artists.

"A lot of what led to his success is him keeping the memory of Polk County with him," said Behrens. "In one way, there's a sense of pride that comes from his work, but also that wildlife aspect he kept with him is something very easy for us to explore. We still have an array of snakes and boaters in Polk County, and viewers will see how that represents us."

One standout sculpture in the exhibit, the 40-foot-long 1969 "Great Rain Snake" sculpture made of oak, is one viewers will enjoy the most, said Behrens.

Stackhouse said the wooden piece wasn't meant to become a thin snake, but somehow it became one as he was preparing the sculpture.

"I took a 40-foot limb from a tree and was trying to make a long object out of it," said Stackhouse. "I was just looking to hang it and flatten it on the wood to make it look thin. It kept wanting to be a snake as I kept doing it. After just working on it for months, it became one."

Stackhouse said he walked over to a zoo in Washington, D.C. - where he lived at the time - and found the head of a cottonmouth snake as the most interesting one to help him finalize the sculpture and added the head.

The artist said he later realized he made the snake a cottonmouth, because those snakes were ones that surrounded him during his childhood in Polk County.

"I was looking for a design in nature and looking to make art decisions, not reminisce and make art of my life," said Stackhouse. "Then I realized those were the snakes I had a more intimate relationship with."

Another standout image in the show is his 7 1/2-foot-by-16-foot "Indigo Way," the largest watercolor painting at the show featuring an image of a shiplike wooden sculpture next to the head of a serpent.

Stackhouse said this painting came to life after someone said she was glad the artist didn't create a large snake sculpture because she wouldn't dare walk through it.

Yet, as an artist, he loves leaving everything he creates to the viewer's personal interpretation for them to explore, watch and enjoy.

"To some people, walking through a sculpture such as that one is like walking through a forest or a cathedral, or even walking through a serpent and being 'swallowed' by the beast," said Stackhouse. "It's a watercolor about travel and journey. It's an organic and spontaneous image. "

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