



Brian Curtis returns to Hillsdale with “Stonehenge”

By Ben Block October 13, 2014

Stunning sunrises and skylscapes break over the mysterious rocks of Stonehenge in Brian Curtis’ exhibit, currently on display in the Daughtry Gallery of the Sage Center for the Arts.

Curtis, a former professor at Hillsdale from 1980 to 1983, returned homecoming weekend to unveil his oil-paintings of Stonehenge. Although he only worked at Hillsdale for three years, Curtis’ impact was felt by campus publications and students both past and present.

Professor of Art Sam Knecht invited Curtis to show his art in Sage. Curtis, uncertain of what art to display, drew a series of skylscapes featuring Stonehenge.

“I wanted to paint landscapes and skies, and I love the stones,” Curtis said.

He used his favorite medium, oil paints, to create the realistic scenery.

“Strangely enough, unlike contemporary art, paintings doesn’t mean anything,” Curtis said. “They’re just meant to be looked at. If it doesn’t talk to you then one of us has missed the boat.”

Instead of forcing a meaning upon visitors, Curtis attached small descriptions of various Neolithic myths.

“He takes inspiration from very interesting places,” said junior Forester McClatchey, an art student who focuses on oil painting and pen and ink illustrations.

The ability of a young painter to look at a predecessors’ work firsthand and converse with the artist is an invaluable asset.

“He paints a sky off of what he feels from the myth,” McClatchey said. “The idea of painting from a sensation rather than a concept is a valuable one.”

Alumni Peter Williams ‘83 attended his former instructor’s exhibit. Williams followed the example of his professors, Sam Knecht and Brian Curtis and has taught at Kellogg Community College in Battle Creek, Michigan for 23 years. Williams spent his first year at an art school before he transferred back to his hometown of Hillsdale.

“[Curtis] really broadened my scope of the world — he was a big impact on me,” Williams said.

The power of Curtis’ artistic ability has not affected only the students, but campus publications. During his time at Hillsdale, Curtis redesigned the masthead of The Collegian. While the masthead has since been re-altered, the college’s logo, past yearbook covers and Tower Player’s posters were all created by Curtis and his students. For all the impact his art had, Curtis didn’t plan on being an artist originally.

Curtis hails from the northeast and grew up in a suburb on Long Island.

“I lived near the great cultural center of the world — New York— and I hardly ever accessed it,” Curtis said.

As is all too common in a society focused on ‘applicable’ and

‘valuable’ skills, Curtis said that artistic endeavors were “not supported by my environment.” Despite his lack of participation in the nearby culture and the absence of artistic support as a kid, a desire to create lurked inside of Curtis.

“I had an aptitude for it and everyone sort of smiled, but it wasn’t the kind of thing you thought to go into as a career,” Curtis said with a grin.

Curtis attended Boston College and graduated with a degree in sociology.

“I worked with delinquents at a residential treatment center right out of college,” Curtis said.

After he worked for four years with troubled kids, Curtis wished a career change.

“It just wasn’t as satisfying as I had hoped, so I returned to a local state art school,” Curtis said. “I had a summer job working for a sign painter in Wareham, Massachusetts. It was the first time I met a man who made a living with his hands and he loved what he did. And I thought, I’ve got to find something like that.”

After seven years of schooling, Curtis graduated from the University of Houston with a graduate degree in painting.

“Upon graduation I got a job at a little school in the center of Michigan called Hillsdale,” Curtis said.

It was his first teaching job. Curtis worked directly alongside Professor Sam Knecht and taught multiple art classes, including drawing and painting.

“Arts were not tremendously supported while I was here [Hillsdale],” Curtis said. “What the college has done with the art, music and theatre departments—I am just astounded by how wonderful it is.”