

## 'Southern Abstraction' is a compelling view of a provocative art form (gallery)

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**Thomas B. Harrison, Press-Register**  
By



Jim Baker of Huntsville, left, and Bobba Turley of Mobile view works by Herb Jackson featured in Today's Visual Language: Southern Abstraction at Mobile Museum of Art. (Press-Register/Mike Kittrell)

MOBILE, Alabama — Abstract art “should be enjoyed just as music is enjoyed,” said Jackson Pollock. “After a while you may like it or you may not.”

Is abstract art something mere mortals are not meant to understand, or is it a form of “visual language” that touches us in subtle yet meaningful ways?

Take a casual stroll around the galleries at Mobile Museum of Art and study the artwork in “Today’s Visual Language: Southern Abstraction, A Fresh Look.”

The exhibit, on view through Sept. 16, is a profusion of odd and eye-catching forms, colors and textures. The vibrancy of this show suggests the electricity of a “live” performance, an ongoing conversation between artist and viewer — and an art form that continues to evolve and re-invent itself.

Many people regard “abstraction” as a fairly recent development, but its roots are much older.

“Much of the art of earlier cultures — signs and marks on pottery, textiles and inscriptions and paintings on rock — were simple, geometric and linear forms (that) might have had a symbolic or decorative purpose,” according to the website Wikipedia.

“It is at this level of visual meaning that abstract art communicates. One can enjoy the beauty of Chinese or Islamic calligraphy without being able to read it.”

Like a great symphony, the artwork in “Southern Abstraction” is a compelling experience.

Every two years the Mobile Museum of Art organizes a major exhibition focused on Southern art, says chief curator Paul W. Richelson, Ph.D.

For this overview of abstract art produced in the last two decades the museum selected 37 artists either born in the Southeast — Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina and Virginia — or who currently reside or attended fine arts programs in those states.

"The invited artists represent a much larger active group of abstractionists than could be accommodated in our exhibition galleries," Richelson states in the introduction to the exhibition catalog. Artwork includes painting, drawing, glass and fiber/mixed media. In all, 77 pieces were chosen by Richelson and Donan Klooz, curator of exhibitions.

"In the 100 years since Russian artist and theorist Wassily Kandinsky began producing non-representational abstract art, liberating the artist from the tyranny of images, it has been utilized at different moments by artists," the introduction states. "Kandinsky explored the world of equivalences: sound and color and emotion and color.

"When the museum received several gifts of abstract paintings by contemporary Southern artists, the curatorial staff was inspired to research the wider context of the use of abstraction today.

"As the influential German-born teacher and painter Hans Hoffman said in 1949, 'A picture should be made with feeling, not with knowing. The possibilities of the medium must be sensed.'

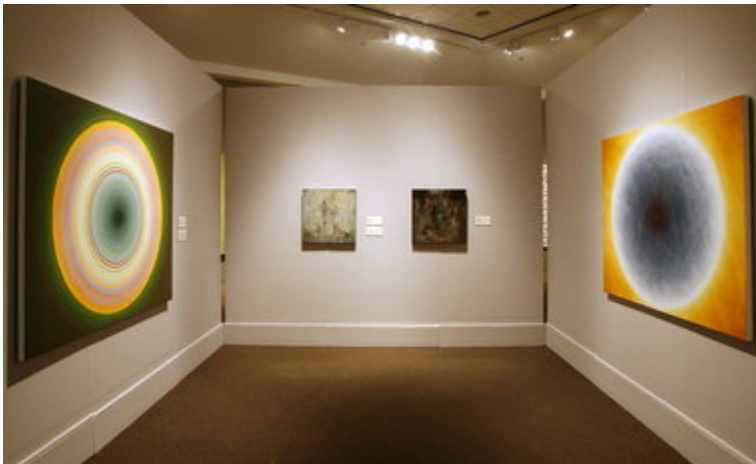


Artwork by Shawne Major featured in Today's Visual Language: Southern Abstraction at Mobile Museum of Art. (Press-Register/Mike Kittrell)

"This desire to proceed through feeling rather than knowing is a funny thing, however, as the desire to be truly innovative is in itself a feeling."

Rene Culler is an assistant professor of art at the University of South Alabama, where she is director of the glass program.

"The work (in 'Southern Abstraction') is from a series I began about three years ago called 'Byzantium,'" she says. "The inspiration comes from the poem by Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium,' as well as the Byzantine-era mosaics that I always visit at the church of Chora when I am in Istanbul."



Mobile Museum of Art is showing artwork by 37 artists with Southern connections in Today's Visual Language: Southern Abstraction. Shown here: artwork by Atlanta artist Don Cooper. (Press-Register/Mike Kittrell)

"The works measure 36 inches high by 26 inches wide and one inch deep. I am using glass that has a dichroic coating — which is way over the top visually — but a modern-day equivalent of the gold that was used in the Byzantine mosaics."

"Byzantium Zed" was created in 2009, and "Byzantium Red" was completed in 2012, according to Culler.

"Since coming to South I have not had the time to continue with my cast-glass sculpture, which I hope to continue soon," she says. "I always create work for the

wall that has become a substitute for drawings and paintings on paper.

"In general, I am interested in texture and surface dimensionality, so these works fit into that mode as they are first fused and then later slumped at high temperatures. I am intrigued by this work and continue with the series. I was delighted to be invited to exhibit with the exciting paintings that one may see at the museum.

"I feel that these works are very 'painterly' as I cut hundreds of squares of glass and then pick and choose colors to lay up, and the colors interact with each other. My esteemed painting teacher at the Cleveland Institute of Art was a student of Joseph Albers; his name is Julian Stanczak and he had the one-person exhibition in New York that was described as 'Op Art.'"

Culler says she regards abstraction as "the most exciting type of work — it demands tuning into the

subconscious.”

This exhibition shows that abstraction is “not just a New York thing,” she says. “Southerners are also tuned in and adept at this way of working, and some of the painters in the exhibit are represented in New York.

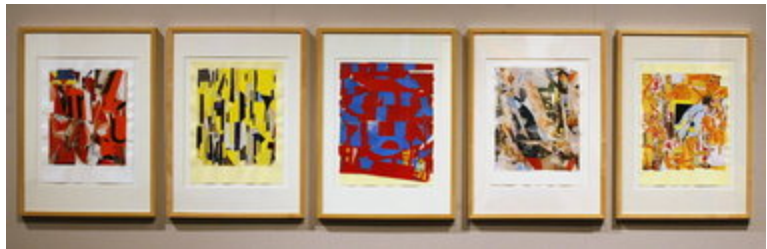
“Many regional shows feature excellent landscapes and seascapes, ‘Southern scenes.’ However, this show illustrates that the South is fertile with all types of creative painting.”

Louisiana artist Anastasia Pelias exhibited her artwork in 2006 at the Eichold Gallery at Spring Hill College, and also in the “Catalyst” show at Space 301 in the aftermath of the BP Gulf oil spill.

She has two paintings in the exhibit:

“Automatics” (“Milk & Honey”), 2008, oil

and acrylic on canvas, 60 by 45 inches; and “Automatics” (“Lookout”), 2009, oil and acrylic on canvas, 50 by 40 inches. Both were part of Pelias’ “Automatics” series from 2008-09.



Artwork by Zdenko Krstic is part of the Southern Abstraction show at Mobile Museum of Art. (Press-Register/Mike Kittrell)

“In this body of work my intent was to remove all conscious thought from the making of the work,” she says, “but I was inspired to create this body of work by the way that snails travel and the trails that they leave, and also by the way that I felt post-Katrina — like a peripatetic refugee with no real place to go. And, of course the Dadas!”

The artist says one of the things she likes best about this exhibition is “the far-reaching parameters associated with the term ‘Southern Abstraction.’”

“Many of the painters in the show were just born in the South or went to school in the South and now live in New York or places other than the South,” she says. “I do believe that to some extent we are all products of our environments, but for me personally my work is informed equally by New Orleans, where I live, and by Greece, my ancestral home.”

Among the artists Pelias most admires are painters.

“Katharina Grosse, Margaret Evangeline, Nancy Haynes (and) James Nares are a few who I’m looking at now,” she says.

Pelias is currently working on a series of paintings called “Washed,” which she says “involves highly saturated fields of color bumping into each other.”



"I just had a solo show of this work at Heriard-Cimino Gallery," she says. "I have a large painting from this series titled 'Love, Pleasure, Water' on view through June 10 at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans."

Thornton Willis ([www.thorntonwillis.com](http://www.thorntonwillis.com)) is a Pensacola artist who now resides and works in New York City. "Southern Abstraction" includes two wall-length paintings, "Gothams' Rhythm" and "Gotham Towers," which will travel from Mobile to Sarah Moody Gallery at the University of Alabama for an extensive one-person show in October.

"I was surprised and pleased that the curators chose such large paintings — 'Gotham's Towers' from 2009 is 97 by 70 inches and 'Gotham's Rhythm' from 2008 is 106 by 65 inches," the artist says via email.

"They also chose the only two paintings I ever made with the word 'Gotham' in the title, (although) titles . . . do not mean a lot to me. I pick them kind of randomly, but these titles do evoke the sense of 'city.'"

"In terms of what has inspired my work, I would include also what has informed my work. Generally, my work has been inspired by the main thrust of western painting, since the post-impressionist, more specifically the Cubists and the American Abstract Expressionists.

"In recent decades my work has been informed by the rhythms, density and the sheer mass of the city. But the work is essentially from the core of my person. Having spent the first 31 years of my life in the Deep South, the climate and color of the South's rich culture was significant in shaping my values and beliefs."



Bayou Haiku #2 by Allison Stewart. (Courtesy of Mobile Museum of Art)

Willis says the artwork in this exhibit is indicative of his lifelong commitment to "a kind of painting, and I can see how my work has developed over the years from where I started out."

"My interest in abstract painting began in the late 1950s when I was enrolled in the school of architecture at Auburn

University. There were not many places back then in the South to see abstract art. I used to drive to New Orleans to catch shows — now you have this great new museum here in Mobile.

"I started out working in shapes and stripes and still am. My paintings in this show are from 2008 and I am currently working in a similar direction."

The title "Southern Abstraction" suggests many things to Willis.

"There is something special about Southern colors, earth, sky, trees and flowers and birds," he says. "Oh, and the food! I had a wonderful childhood sitting up top in the limbs of trees, or going night fishing. The experience of nature is at the heart of every artist. Our origins are important but as artists we have to go beyond regionalism to consider the whole of American culture."

"Perhaps the show's title suggests that abstract painting is ongoing in America, alive and well, and that many of the painters responsible for the strength and health of abstract painting in America today are Southerners?"

Willis says many abstract artists from the South have contributed to American painting and sculpture.

"Some are known and some are lesser known, but they all put in the time and sweat to move it forward," he says. "In order to do so, they most often had to leave their homes in the South and come to large centers like New York. Here they met up with their counterparts from the Midwest, North and Southeast, and the Coast. All together they brought their own regional sensibilities and shared ideas and techniques.

"What emerged is an "x 'international' style. Abstract painting today is about an international style."

Willis says his own work reflects many influences including Cubism, especially the work of Braque, Picasso and Juan Gris.

"The American Abstract Expressionists were a particularly important and powerful influence," he says, "and that includes Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and my mentor, the painter Melville Price, in particular. Also, there have been contemporary influences such as the work of Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, and Ray Parker."

Allison Stewart is well known to Mobile art lovers, having shown her work at the Eichold Gallery and Space 301, among other venues.

**She recently completed work for a large one-person exhibit at Southeastern University of Louisiana in Hammond. The exhibit will be on view during June at the Contemporary Art Gallery on the university campus.**

**"In addition to paintings on canvas, I will have two installations of drawings and large paintings on drafting**

## **'SOUTHERN ABSTRACTION'**

**WHAT:** "Today's Visual  
Language: Southern  
Abstraction, A Fresh Look"

film," she says. "I've been experimenting with new materials and approaches and am looking forward to seeing the work installed."

Stewart's work in "Southern Abstraction" is titled "Bayou Haiku #2" and is one of the many pieces she completed in 2006 after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

"Two of those paintings, 'Bayou Haiku #1' and 'Bayou Haiku #2,' address the dilemma of living in an area where man and nature exist in uneasy and precarious balance," Stewart says. " 'Bayou Haiku #1' (not in the show) references a dying swamp, with browns and blacks and swirling gray waters filled with detritus.

" 'Bayou Haiku #2' describes a recovering swamp full of verdant color and healthy with signs of new life. In the center is the crimson 'heart' of the swamp, with its mysterious and mystical properties. Both paintings address the constant flux of destruction and regeneration."

"Bayou Haiku#2" is a diptych measuring 48 by 130 inches and was created using mixed media, including gesso, charcoal, acrylic, tar and oil glazes, according to the artist.

"I live one block from the Mississippi River and frequently walk along its levees," Stewart says. "The life-giving and life-taking power of water has become my primary subject matter. Over the years I've been interested in the many problems involving our waterways, the loss of our wetlands and the measures that man has taken to accelerate that loss."

The "Catalyst" exhibit addressed the problem in an eloquent way, according to Stewart.

" 'Southern Abstraction' has a wider focus and includes more facets of living and working in the South," she says. "I think we are a region of story-tellers, so narrative and metaphor play an important role in Southern art. I also

**WHEN:** through Sept. 16

**WHERE:** Mobile Museum of Art  
in Langan Park, west Mobile

**NOTE:** Exhibit is an overview of contemporary abstract art featuring work by 37 artists with ties in heritage or training to Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina and Virginia. Includes painting on canvas and paper, drawings on paper, glass, fiber/mixed media and collage.

**CURATORS:** Paul W. Richelson, Ph.D., chief curator for the Mobile Museum of Art; and Donan Klooz, curator of exhibitions.

**ALSO ON VIEW:** "Boxes & Their Makers," through July 1; "The Heart of Echizen: Wood-Fired Works by Contemporary Masters," through July 28; and "Masters of Graphic Art from the Collection of Gerald Swetsky," through Sept. 24.

**HOURS:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m.  
Monday-Saturday; 1-5 p.m.  
Sunday

**ADMISSION:** \$10 for adults, \$6 for students

**INFO:** 251-208-5200 or

**believe that the South, and especially New Orleans, is a place for the senses.**

**[www.mobilemuseumofart.com](http://www.mobilemuseumofart.com)**

**"The intoxicating scent of night jasmine and chicory coffee roasting, the sound of ships' horns on the river, the overgrowth and intensity of the colors of the azaleas and crepe myrtle all influence my artistic creation."**

**Although there are many notable Southern abstract artists, Stewart thinks the explosion of abstraction occurred after World War II when the center of the art world moved from Paris to New York.**

**"To me the South could not have produced major movements like minimalism or conceptualism because we are too celebratory and too tied to the land," she says. "We do not need lofty intellectual underpinnings to justify the art we make. Our art is often filled joy and quirkiness.**

**"I find that paintings made in the Northeast are often predominately gray and ponderous, while paintings in the Southwest reflect the colors of the sunset and wide open spaces.**

**"Southern art to me is about living close to our roots and celebrating each day. Southern artists and Southern writers share the same creative bed."**

**Stewart says her primary influence has been the British artist William Turner, whose "passion for his craft as well as his fascination with weather and atmosphere, wind and water has inspired me for many years."**

**She says the evolution of art in the South has been intriguing and exhilarating.**

**"Several years ago in New Orleans there was a group of figurative artists loosely called 'Visionary Imagists,' which included Douglas Bourgeois, Jacqueline Bishop and George Febres.**

**"Today there are a number of young artists along the St. Claude corridor in New Orleans doing interesting work in every medium including sound, video, computer-generated art and performance," she says.**

**"The line between two- and three-dimensional art, between art and craft, and between high art and street art has been erased. Today anything goes. It's very exciting!"**