

ARTS



Daniel Burns' "Austin Skyline."



"Potrero Hill" by David Leonard.

Austin an ever-changing city for artists

The Davis Gallery exhibit explores multiple unique visions of urban landscapes.

By Arianna Auber
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Anyone who's been in Austin long enough has noticed the city skyline expand both outward and upward – but they've probably not watched it transform the way three area artists have. The painters have made a living out of studying and capturing cities across the United States, from Los Angeles to New York and, now, Austin.

For David Leonard, it's the juxtaposition of man-made buildings with the natural environment that keeps him transfixed. Christopher St. Leger, who studied architecture in school, focuses on the buildings themselves. Daniel Burns likes it all

and prefers to capture the rhythm of a city, its movement and flow.

Their paintings, all very different takes on urban landscapes, are the focus of the Davis Gallery's current exhibit, "The Town & The City," running through Aug. 17.

In the middle of the action

When Burns wants to paint a piece of Austin – as small as a fire hydrant sometimes, as big as the Seaholm power plant at other times – he likes to be in the thick of the urban sights and sounds that make cities so captivating to him. He sets up his canvas at a street corner and tries to color the blank white space into a representation

of downtown, the east-side or South Congress Avenue before the light shifts in about three hours' time.

A Capitol Metro bus might block his view; a curious bystander might try to talk to him. Painting "en plein air" is challenging, but the exhilarating rush he gets as the city moves all around him, not waiting for his paint brush, keeps him coming back.

"Pedestrians come and go, and you pick up parts of them and combine them into one figure in the painting," Burns said. "Someone will have just the right color dress and you say, 'I've got to get that one!' You try to capture each moment, each fleeting moment. That's my goal. I'm trying to capture the experience of being on the street, rather than an exact replica of being on the street."

Man vs. nature

Leonard never laid eyes on a big city until he was 18 and no longer in the small country village of West Eaton, NY. The visit to New York City left a lasting visual impression on him, he said, one that compels him still to travel to the top of a bridge or the middle of a street and click away on his camera. He then uses the images to develop a photorealistic painting of many American cities, such as San Francisco, Philadelphia and Boston. He's captured Austin, too, a town that came into maturity at the same time as other southern cities: after the invention of the automobile, an event that caused cities to sprawl out rather than shoot up.

"This difference (southern cities have with other cities) can be seen

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"THE TOWN & THE CITY"

Where: The Davis Gallery, 837 W. 12th St.

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays, through Aug. 17

Cost: Free

Artist talk: Featuring Daniel Burns and Christopher St. Leger from 6 to 8 p.m. Aug. 14.

Information: www.davisgalleryaustin.com.



Christopher St. Leger's "Tenement."

'Something that is living has some dirt on it.'

Christopher St. Leger, Artist on how he paints in watercolor

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in how the manmade structures fill the environment," Leonard said.

He likes to study the impact people have made on the land around them, particularly through building on it or filling it in, because often the effects can be striking. Even land that may look untouched by human hands isn't as unpolluted by us as we think, he said, a consequence of development he illustrated in "Continental Divide."

Making a mess

Like Burns, St. Leger used to paint en plein air. Then, he started painting from photographs as Leonard does. Now, however, he prefers his watercolor work to showcase the general quality of a place, rather than its exact address and each detail accompanying it, a change he said is "back to the basics" because he's "not trying to find a postcard angle of the city." For example, he might

paint an aerial replica of the University of Texas campus, but distress it on purpose.

"I labor over my pieces and spill things and I try really hard to be messy because I'm trying to bring something to life, and to me, something that is living has some dirt on it," he said. "There's that happy accident thing that goes on with watercolor."

Plus, be too specific and the painting might not be as relatable to someone as it could be. He's interested in demonstrating what it's like to live in a city, whether it's Austin, New York or Houston. In fact, when he comes to Austin – he lives in Lockhart – he prefers to paint buildings and other city landmarks that are more anonymous and nondescript than, say, the Frost Bank Tower, now an iconic local structure. "My favorite buildings in downtown Austin have no form to them whatsoever," he said. "They're just sort of blocks."

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'You try to capture ... each fleeting moment. That's my goal.'

Daniel Burns, Artist on what he likes to capture in his work