

Artist returns to his Lakewood roots

By Rob O'Connor
Staff Writer

Pat Matthews' art studio in Hillcrest looks like a gigantic birthday cake, covered as it is from Oriental rug to vaulted ceiling with thick dollops of brightly colored oil paint.

Indeed, the North Little Rock native and descendant of Park Hill developer Justin Matthews, says visitors aren't likely to leave the loft-style space without at least a fleck of sunny yellow or vivid red on their clothing or skin.

But a heavy hand is necessary to achieve the rugged landscape portraits he loves to create while backpacking or four-wheeling through the back woods of places like Durango, Colo.

"People like the texture," he said of his work, which he describes as abstract impressionism influenced in equal part by the work of Vincent Van Gogh and Claude Monet.

Indeed, he said, the paintings he produces are so rich in color

and full of depth, "You could almost eat it."

Matthews will host his first North Little Rock art show at 6 p.m. today in the new Lakewood House Gallery, a former bar on the first floor of the apartment building remodeled as an art-space by local interior designer Tom Chandler.

The show, free and open to the public, will feature 60 paintings ranging from farm scenes and wooded landscapes to bouquets of flowers and American flags.

Asked about his work, Matthews, who is just shy of his 40th birthday, speaks with the enthusiasm of fresh-faced actor on stage.

"I've always wanted to be an artist," he said.

But it wasn't until two years ago when he swapped architectural plans for art lessons with longtime friend and Little Rock artist Barry Thomas that his career path was firmly set.

"After meeting Barry, I

told myself, 'I've got to learn to paint,'" Matthews said.

And so the two forged a friendship now so trusting that they are not afraid to walk up to one another's works in progress, take out their palette knives and scrape the canvases clean, boldly chiding one another to do better.

Thomas and Matthews have even traveled together to paint scenes in southern France, on the coast of Spain and in central Mexico. But their best trips, Thomas said, are the simple ones

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BETH MCCARRON

Pat Matthews' abstract American flags will be included in tonight's show.



PHOTOS BY BETH MCCARRON

Matthews, above, demonstrates the short brush strokes he uses to give his paintings a layered look and heavy textures that he prefers. The artist, below, mixes oil paints on his palette.

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during which they "get up like hunters" and paint flooded timberlands in Lake Village and Lake Enterprise in Wilmot, Ark.

"Painting the mundane is the prettiest, not the grandiose," said Thomas, who refuses to take credit for helping Matthews hone his artistic skills.

"He works so hard at it. Every year he gets better. . . . It's inspiring."

Truth is, Matthews has possessed an artistic eye since he was young, a likely combination of natural talent and the influence of family members whose interests included architecture and music.

His father, Charles Matthews of Bella Vista, would frame his drawings of flowers and give them away to family friends as a way of encouraging his son to continue working at his craft. They also would visit museums here and abroad so the youngster could study up close the works of masters like Van Gogh and Monet.

There was even an impressive collection of original artwork, such as "The Young Artist" by Delta artist Carol Clow,

in the family's Lakewood home.

After graduating from Little Rock Central, where he was voted "most artistic," Matthews studied architecture at the University of Arizona at Tucson.

During his senior year, he won the school's top design prize, which included money for a European tour and a job at Anderson Debartelo Pan, a renowned Arizona architecture firm.

After college, Matthews worked for several architectural firms. And then, in 1989, he moved back to Little Rock, where he set up his own firm in Hillcrest.

But his artistic skills were soon eclipsed by modern technology.

"Architecture used to be about drawing," he said.

"Now, it's all [done] on computers."

So two years ago Matthews started painting full time,

never daring to look back

except right before his first art show at a Little Rock gallery.

"I couldn't sleep for days before the first show," he recalled, laughing.

But his worries were for naught — the show sold out the first night.

And so did his second show.

"That gave me incentive to go for it," Matthews said of his new career, which has prompted him and his wife, Katherine, to move to Santa Fe, N.M., in order to draw inspiration from other artists as well as sell his paintings in an international market.

His paintings now hang in

two Santa Fe galleries.

He treats his new trade like a business, he says, waking up every weekday at 6 a.m. to paint.

"I work every day," he said, adding that even on the days he can't force himself to pick up a paint brush he does something like update his Web site or prepare the heavy wooden frames — several of which are made out of wood harvested from ancient barns.

Still, Matthews said, he finds no fun in the money part of his enterprise.

In fact, he leaves the pricing of his paintings to his wife. And most of them cost between \$300 and \$7,000.

"[Money] takes the fun out of it," he said. "I just paint."

And the self-proclaimed outdoorsman who enjoys hunting, fishing, hiking and camping, does a lot of painting outdoors, encircled by Aspen trees or surrounded by cypress-lined marshland.

He usually backpacks or uses his four-wheeler, which is equipped with a heater so he can paint in cold weather, to get his supplies out to a remote area. And he paints right there on the spot, waiting

until he gets back home to touch up the work, using the hundreds of photographs he takes as reference points.

He says he just enjoys being outside, and he can't resist the temptation to sometimes pull over on the side of a road and start putting color on canvas.

"I look at everything as a painting," he said. "When I drive down the road, I don't get very far."

Still he has not forgotten his roots, cherishes this chance to come home and display his work in a building his grandfather built in a neighborhood his great grandfather established.

Indeed, it is something he fashions doing with some regularity, he admits — though even getting ready for a show like tonight's he is still his own harshest critic.

"I'm frustrated with just about everything I do," he said.

Which sometimes keeps him painting until he can hardly paint another stroke or painting so fast he has to remind himself to stop and "breathe" by placing a sticky note on his easel.

"You have to do it and do it," he said.

