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Photograph by George Sakkestad

Artist Lou Bermingham's "Marengo" is one of his works currently on display at Cafe Rouge.

European masters, aikido influence art

By Shari Kaplan

Although some of his largest works are stained-glass windows, Lou Bermingham has reduced the scale of his abstract and surreal mixed-media paintings currently on display at Cafe Rouge to fit the walls of the coffeehouse.

What is not reduced is the feeling Bermingham puts into every piece--an emotive quality evident when he talks about the creative process, which for him began in early childhood.

"I was one of those kids where all I wanted to do was sit and draw," he says, adding how fascinated he was with a set of oil paints given to him at age five. That fascination followed him to San Jose State University, where he graduated in 1979 with a bachelor's degree in art, with a painting concentration.

A Capitola resident, Bermingham currently does most of his painting in his Holy City studio in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where glassblower Tom Stanton runs Holy City Art Glass. Bermingham first became interested in glass art upon meeting Stanton nearly 20 years ago, when both men were taking an art class at San Jose State.

As a junior, Bermingham spent a year abroad, studying arts and humanities in Aix-en-Provence, France, the hometown of Paul Cézanne. Other artists whose work Bermingham enjoys include Picasso, Matisse and Dali.

It was also in France that he began studying aikido, a Japanese system of self-defense that has influenced his art just as studying the European master painters has.

"In aikido, if one chooses to, there's a strong philosophical, spiritual background to study. The process of aikido allows you to open up to greater realms of experience," explains Bermingham, who for the last 10 years has run Aikido of Los Gatos.

"The feelings these open for me I try to include in my art. There can be a meditative quality to painting."

Occasionally, Bermingham says, a figure will come out of a picture even when he did not envision it in his mind. Such is the case with the large paintings "Mystery" and "The Seven of Disks," the title of the latter taken from a tarot card that happened to fall propitiously out of a deck.

Bermingham sometimes arrives at titles through less tangible inspirations--when he cannot come up with a name, he leaves the art alone for a while, rather than "trying to intellectualize what I can title it." Sure enough, a title usually comes to him out of the blue, which he then knows *has* to be the title. This was how the diminutive canvas titled "Votive Offering to the Goddess" got its name.

"Marengo" and "Not the River Adda" are titled with place names history buffs might recognize--both were sites of victories by Napoleon during the Napoleonic Wars, a period that interests Bermingham.

Having lived in Egypt and traveled to various countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, Bermingham says travel has also influenced him intellectually and artistically, particularly when he recalls the colors and patterns that are indicative of certain cultures, such as the whitewashed look of Morocco, where primary colors and earth tones are the predominant hues. Reminiscences of past places or ideas may inspire him many years after the initial experience, he says.

Bermingham's art may be viewed at Cafe Rouge, 42 Elm St., through June 8.

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