

A Modern Renaissance

NORTH STAR'S EXHIBIT MERGES MYTHS AND REALITY

By Christie Citranglo



Above: Brian Keeler's "Lunar Graces," which features dancers at one of Ithaca's famous gorges.

Right: Keeler's "Cayuga Inlet, Through Reflected Clouds," which is another painting that captures local landscapes. (Art: Brian Keeler)



In a large, Victorian gallery on the outskirts of Ithaca, The Renaissance makes a modern comeback. Ancient Greek and Roman characters come to life on the Ithaca gorges and landscapes from New England and Italy. They're dancing on the water, splashing in puddles surrounded by trees — or maybe they're just everyday people rowing on the Cayuga Inlet.

"On the Water," North Star Art Gallery's newest exhibit, features the works of Ithaca artist Brian Keeler's oil paintings. The collection displays Keeler's recent pieces, all centering on the theme of water. Growing up on the Susquehanna River, Keeler was always near the water and frequently painted it — and he's continued to paint water over the decades he's been an artist and teacher. Keeler is a quick worker — he almost always paints en plein air from start to nearly finish — and his studio is filled with landscape shots from places he's lived and visited. "On the Water" captures just a taste of Keeler's style, a style that's popping with colors and fantasy.

"My colors are somewhat intuitive and somewhat arbitrary," he said. "Lately they've been more traditional in what we call 'local' color. Primarily what I do is I

paint the light in the scene, so I'm still painting the actual color."

When satin inlets and flying characters merge with Keeler's pallet, it feels like a subdued comic book. Instead of bright reds and harsh lines, these works focus on pastel colors with dark compliments and blended edges. Clay dirt shines in orange, black shadows morph into purple and skies swallow landscapes in color.

What remains constant in Keeler's work is a sense of whimsy. Since his art is inspired by his passions for different myths and the places he loves to travel to, a sense of warmth radiates from each piece.

"They're fun to do. I get to update these myths in current settings and give them more context," Keeler said. "That's sort of what the Renaissance painters did, too, putting Christian allegories with their time period."

Paintings in "On the Water" are mostly done in oil, which may seem odd given so many of them were painted so quickly. Watercolors and immediacy often go together, but never oils. Keeler sticks to oils not because of their immediacy but because of their malleability. Oils can be pushed around easily, and if a mistake is

made, correcting it is simple for Keeler.

"There's something very rewarding about making a statement of your impression and what you see in a couple hours, like a direct interpretation," he said. "I do use photographs (before I paint) a lot, but I like the directness and the immediacy of [en plein air]."

Immediacy, along with water and whimsy, is another one of Keeler's themes as a painter. Ideas of immediacy, while they aren't exclusive to "On the Water,"



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brand his work. It may also be why he's an Ithaca artist that takes the time to paint Ithaca: it's part of his immediate routine.

"[These paintings] have these unvarnished looks to them because I'm working instantly, and I'm trying to condense everything into the economy of pictorial means," Keeler said. "I'm trying to get a statement or impression of something in just a couple of hours."

The last theme of Keeler's comes in the form of storytelling. Whether the painting is telling ancient stories, modern stories or both, the works capture something — and it likely won't be the same for every viewer of "On the Water."

"When I paint, I represent how we live and what our truth is," he said. "That has this authenticity about it." •

"On the Water" will have an open house reception 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 5, at North Star Art Gallery, 743 Snyder Hill Road, Ithaca. The exhibition will run from Aug. 5-31.