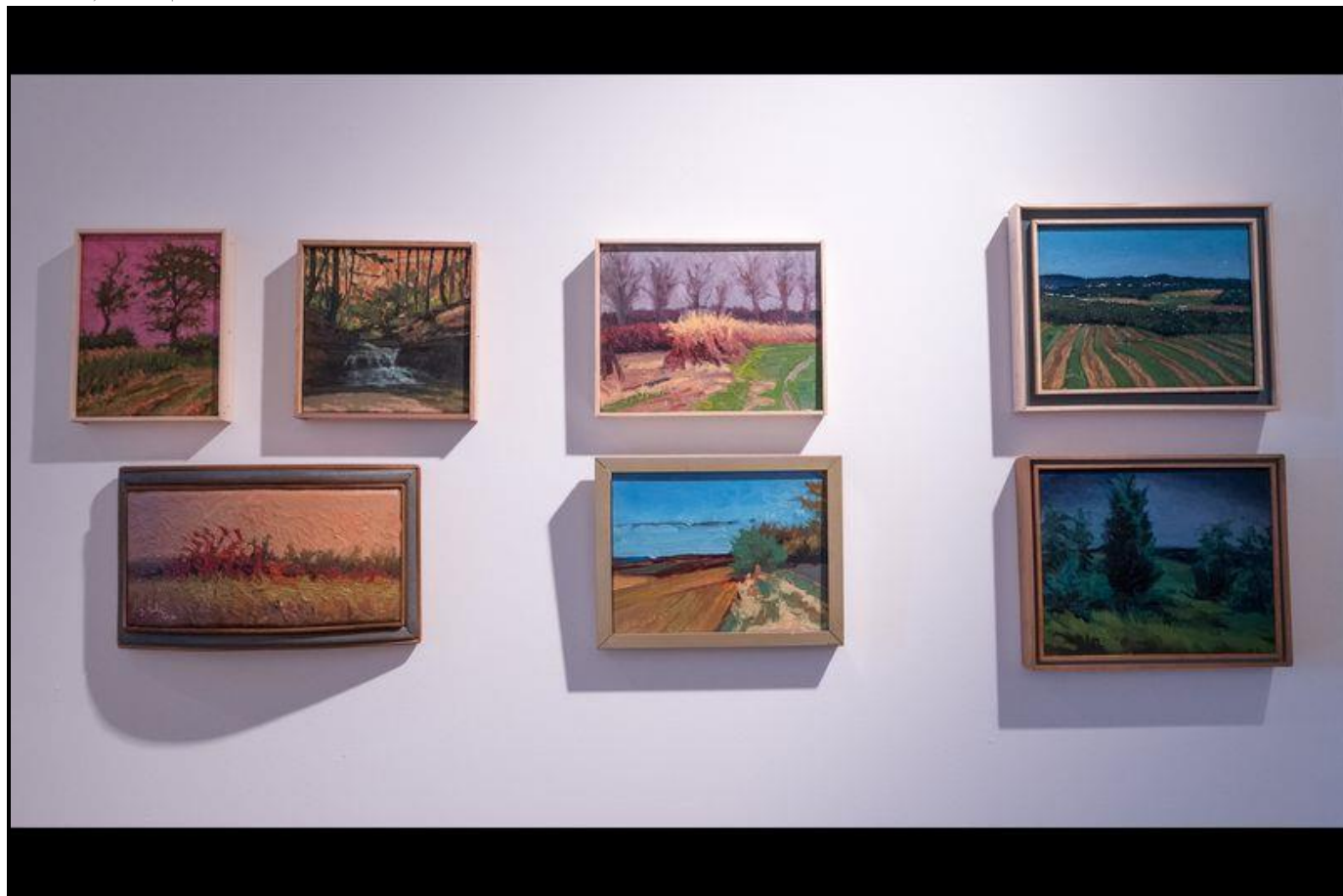


Easton exhibit honors Lehigh Valley artist Tom Burke

By TIM HIGGINS

SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL |

JUL 29, 2016 | 7:39 PM



Tom Burke Memorial Show

A memorial show to Tom Burke, an influential Lehigh Valley artist is set to open on Saturday at the Nature Center on Northampton Street in Easton. (SHARON K. MERKEL / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)

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Lehigh Valley artist Tom Burke died in February of kidney failure after a lifetime as a painter and a teacher and promoter of other artists.

During his career, Burke produced hundreds of paintings, many of which are in private collections and museums or on the walls of corporations, office buildings and hospitals. He participated in dozens of shows.

In his honor, a memorial show has been mounted at the Nurture Nature Center in Easton. "Celebrating the Life of Thomas F. Burke," which opens today, includes 75 paintings 1982-2016, including an unfinished work found on his easel when he died. Tom's wife, Ann, and the couple's sons, Evan and Daniel, selected the work.

The works were hung with the help of Keri Maxfield, artistic director of the Nurture Nature Center and a former student of Burke's, and several other artist friends. The show is in the Delaware Room, where a memorial service will be held 3-4 p.m. today.

"A passionate educator, Tom has influenced the lives and work of hundreds of students, including my husband and me," Maxfield says. "He was my first painting professor. It is an honor to help facilitate this exhibit celebrating his life's work."

"His work is transformational. He made me look at the landscape in a whole different way. His landscapes are expansive yet intimate; they make visible the bonds he felt with these places in a very sensual way. As young students, Tom took us out of the studio and into the woods, fields and hills to paint plein-air. Thirty years later and I'm still exploring that bond between humans and their environment."

Ann Burke says she was happy Nurture Nature was hosting the show. "Tom had shows at the Nurture Nature Center several times in the past few years and loved the light and feel of the space," she says. "I couldn't think of a better place to hold the memorial and exhibition."

The memorial service will include remembrances by family and friends, including Richard Master, CEO of Easton frame-maker MCS Industries, and

artist Barbara Kozero, followed by a musical selection by Lee Daniels. A reception will follow in the center's Science Hall 4-5 p.m.

Burke was born and raised in Indianapolis, Ind., and received his BS with a double major in art education/fine arts, painting, drawing and sculpture in 1972 from Indiana University in Bloomington. Like many artists of his generation he left his hometown to come to New York and received his MFA in painting and drawing from the City University of New York, Queens College in 1977.

Tom moved to the Lehigh Valley in 1979 with his wife and began a career teaching in art programs in eastern Pennsylvania colleges and universities for the next 35 years, including Lafayette College, Northampton Community College, Desales University and Kutztown University.

"I started my art collection with a Tom Burke painting back in the mid-'90s while he was a teacher at Lafayette," says Master, who hired Burke as his corporate gallery director. "I was attracted to his color. He had an interesting brushstroke style and conveyed a real passion in his work. He also did wonderful, precise portraits. Tom loved to teach and I studied with him for a while. He was a very sincere person."

The exhibit reveals Burke as a master of the dynamic landscape. His approach to the landscape genre straddled the figurative and the abstract, capturing the raw energy of nature in bold brushstrokes and vibrant Expressionist colors. In his paintings you can feel the wind and how it moves the grass and the trees. You can feel the heat of the sun on tall grass or the coolness of the deep blue shade of a row of nearby trees.

There was another side to Burke's work, which is also on view in several paintings that reflect his interest in the figurative/surreal. In one corner of the Delaware Room is his last unfinished painting, a penciled still life of a table with various objects. Next to this work is a triptych titled "Altar Piece," and in

the upper left corner there is an image of Tom — a small self-portrait of himself working at the easel — captured in a parabolic mirror. It is an homage of sorts to his classical training.

Burke knew paint. He would grind the raw ingredients for his colors and he developed his own glazes and varnishes after a lifetime of study. His unique style of plein-air painting came from a love of nature, a thrill of being out and in the middle of a field. On good days he would travel to the farms and fields around Jacobsburg or venture deep into the state game lands where he would set up his easel, often in the windiest and rainiest of weather, and just paint. It wasn't just landscapes that Burke excelled at. He was also commissioned to paint portraits of public figures. And it was his expertise and knowledge of paint techniques that led him to restore damaged historical paintings.

Burke was part of a group of artists who got together regularly to discuss art and the world at diners throughout the Lehigh Valley, but most often at the Blue Sky Cafe in Bethlehem.

"In our company at weekly breakfasts, making fun, Tom could give as good as he got," says Robin Miller, a local filmmaker. "He put forward his convictions in a soft-spoken manner, and owned that he had 'evolved' from his Midwestern upbringing. He had a wonderful talent as an artist, gallery manager and art teacher. Despite a lifetime of serious health issues, Tom's was a generous heart, and he is sorely missed."

"Blue Sky was mostly where I saw Tom these last few years," artist Joe Skrapits says. "He introduced me to the group several years ago. That's one of the many kindnesses he showed me. He was a 'connector,' very generous with his friends, bringing people together — not necessarily people with identical views, but people who share a certain appreciation, shall we say, for life's screwiness."

"He wasn't a cynic — that's clear from his lifelong dedication to his art — but he did have a finely honed sense of the absurd. I miss not having him around

for our fat-chewing sessions at Blue Sky during this momentous presidential election."

"As an artist, Tom was a master of several visual languages, and an innovator within the tradition of post-Impressionist landscape painting. I don't know of any other contemporary artist who's gone as far as mixing his own paints to achieve the effect he wanted. That gorgeous color in his paintings is the result of a fairly radical and certainly a very laborious process. He made it look easy; it wasn't."

A quote from Burke that sums up his feelings about his work is framed on one wall.

"When I walk the fields of eastern Pennsylvania, I can observe nature changing the face of the land. For the past 16 years I have recorded these changes. It is a diary of what I have witnessed in nature, but it also becomes a witness of my life."

Tim Higgins is a freelance writer.

Jodi Duckett, editor

Jodi.duckett@mcall.com

610-820-6704

'CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF THOMAS F. BURKE'

- What:** Memorial celebration and exhibition of 75 paintings by the late Lehigh Valley artist.
- When:** Memorial Celebration 3-4 p.m. followed by a reception. Exhibition continues through Sept. 16.
- Where:** Nurture Nature Center, 518 Northampton St., Easton,
- Gallery hours:** 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesdays; 6-9 p.m. Thursdays; 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays
- Info:** 610-253-4432