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Van Brunt Gallery
Landscape Show

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Pavilions of light

James Dustin's architectural visions at Beacon's Van Brunt Gallery

By Paul Smart

It's hard to escape the central contradiction between James Dustin's life and art if visiting his 1811 West Cocksackie mansion home in Greene County. What he paints, and has become known for painting, are clean-lined, unpeopled modern architectural structures through which more traditional landscape subjects - the Hudson, New York cityscapes - peek out around corners or through dramatic wall openings. But where he dreams up his paintings, and likes to show them in his Minimalist but warm home gallery, is anything but modern in style or ambience. In many ways, it's a perfect example of a similar dichotomy in all art presentation: between the dreamed and the everyday, or the gallery setting and the studio - not to forget the home setting most artists want to see their works inevitably grace and affect.

Dustin's work, like so much of what's best in art these days, uses its elements with care and thoughtfulness. He's a master craftsman, in terms of both design and what we tend to summarize as execution, or the actual application of material (paint, charcoal et cetera) to surface. But he's also adept at juxtaposing Minimalist elements - the lack of humanity, excepting an archaeological presence; a penchant for cloudless skies and blank shadows - against a quietly lush recognition of emotional resonance.

When we get together I mention that there's something about the interplay of light and shadow in his pieces, both big and small, that reminds me of the way one lies abed at night as a child, watching the reflections of car lights creep across bedroom walls and ceilings. And Dustin smiles, recognizing the same wordless imagery and the powerful way in which light plays on, and triggers, memory, and memories capture and hold emotional truths. "I've got my eyes set," he says after talking about his methodology, picked up after studying art and design at the Maine School of Art, then spending years split between work with some top New York design firms while exploring his unique painting style at night, or on those free days he wrangled, increasingly, from his busy schedule.

Dustin makes models - "pavilion houses," he calls them - that he then sets in front of landscape backgrounds and photographs. After manipulating the images in Photoshop, he then renders them on can-



JAMES DUSTIN'S (TOP) PAVILION MODEL 166 PAINTING #1 AND (BOTTOM) PAVILION MODEL 166 PAINTING #5

vas or paper, changing elements to fit the new medium. It makes for a fascinating oeuvre that has gained him an increasing number of museum and gallery shows around the nation, including a notable presence in the current landscape show at the Van Brunt Gallery in Beacon - up through this weekend - where he has been the focus of solo exhibits in the past. Furthermore, the work, in both single, large images and wall-encompassing multiples, laid out on carefully designed grids, has become something of a darling of the corporate art world, selling well, often in commissions, for boardrooms and corporate foyers.

So how does one get to such a vision, such eyes? Dustin was born and raised in a middle-sized New Hampshire town to a

family that wasn't exactly culture-oriented. He found support for his penchant to draw and design throughout high school, then followed his Muse from there.

Earlier bodies of work that Dustin created include gridlike mosaics of smaller depictions of Egyptian mummies, armored heads and, later, ship and plane wrecks and the Wright Brothers' first flights. All mix a sense of dispassion, buoyed by the multiple takes on singular subjects, with Impressionist flourishes and a generally warm approach to painting.

Dustin doesn't dwell on what he does, except to talk about the amount of work he puts into what he does, from its making to the hours that he puts into getting it all out into the world via such materials as a catalogue, regular mailings and a superbly

designed and easily navigated website.

So is there anyplace new he wants to go with what he does? Are there new subjects he wants to explore, or is he content working within the limitations he's set for himself, and gained increasing success from? Similarly, does he feel in tune with the community he's moved into, salvaging what had once been one of his town's major homes before it fell into disrepair, lost to changing times?

The artist leads me up to his studio, in a large bedroom on the second floor, high-ceilinged and light-filled. It's filled with Dustin works in various stages of completion: pavilion models, photos, architectural

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drawings, rough studies for larger paintings and piles of finished works waiting to head out to new shows coming up in Richmond, Virginia and Troy, New York.

No need for bigger dreams just now, Jim Dustin replies. He's enjoying the work at hand. He's got a job to do.

As the light bounces around the studio, and later the gallery downstairs, the pieces seem to change with it - their own interplay of light and shadow gaining new meanings, new echoes and relationships with each other, as well as the inner memory the whole body of work somehow emanates from and reflects. "It would be nice to be given the chance to actually build one of my pavilions on a hill somewhere," he says with a boyish grin, eyes alight with possibility and playfulness. "It would be interesting to see how real to make it, and also how fake - and to then put the paintings of the space inside it, so you'd have this deep interplay between what's inside and what's out."

It's a grand, beautiful vision that seems entirely possible. And yet Dustin shakes his head at it, for the moment. "There'd be a lot of details to work through. And it would cost a bit of money," he says. Yet his eyes don't stop glinting. The playfulness still remains.

For further information on James Dustin, including his work in the current show at the Van Brunt Gallery and other upcoming exhibits, visit the artist's website at www.jamesdustin.com.