



Coming home

Rafael Salas has studied in Italy, New York and New Mexico. But it is in Ripon that he learned to think like an artist, and open his mind to new ideas.

by Ian Stepleton

Bold colors jump off the canvas. The scenes feel real, yet tainted somehow.

It's almost as if viewing the world through a prism, a filter. It's familiar, but yet

somehow uneasy.

Nothing seems quite as it should.

Ripon-native Rafael Salas, however, knows where the images came from.

They're scenes passed through

the lens of his eyes, filtered through his retina and bent around the wrinkles of his cerebellum.

His art is life; it's the world around him. It's just life colored by his memory, tweaked by his emotions.

for the Arts.

While the exhibit runs Friday through March 6, the opening evening will be particularly important for Salas, as he hosts an Artist Reception for his home community at 7 p.m.

In that forum that he

hopes to reconnect with family and friends from the area, as well as with several teachers he credits with laying the bricks that later would pave his journey into the art world.



RAFAEL SALAS HANGS one of his paintings at Caestecker Art Gallery in preparation for a show. *Ian Stepleton photo*

Friday is homecoming for artist Rafael Salas.

It's been almost 15 years since graduating with the Ripon High School class of 1991, and that decade-and-a-half has taken him on an unexpected journey.

It's a trip that took him through such vistas as London, Italy, New York, experiencing art, education and even tragedy.

But its the inner journey that tugged Salas back to Ripon.

The circle completes itself Friday night as he will exhibit a selection of his paintings at the Caestecker Art Gallery in Ripon College's C.J. Rodman Center

At a glance

Who: Ripon High School graduate and artist Rafael Salas

What: Exhibition and artist reception

When: Reception: Friday at 7 p.m. Exhibition: Friday through March 6

Where: Caestecker Art Gallery at Ripon College's C.J. Rodman Center for the Arts.

CREATIVE MIND FORGED IN RIPON

Although he's studied art in New York, Salas knows the base of his artistic beliefs came from 850 Tiger Drive.

"There were a few teachers there at that time," he said of

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his high school instructors. "John Saecker, Mrs. Klapperich ... They really just provided the idea of art as a foundation ..."

He pointed to Margaret Klapperich, for example, as "an outstanding teacher, a motivational teacher, who really turned me on to the visual arts. I feel like that really rubbed off."

"For a small town, lots and lots of my friends pursued their creative talents pretty seriously."

Salas, however, modestly downplays his own abilities.

"I've always thought the creative mind is like most other minds," he said. "You can use the same talents to go into many different things. [The key is] finding an outlet for the creative talent."

While it's a passion of his, Salas originally didn't pursue art as a career.

He graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul with a double major in art and education, while minoring in English.

And for a time, he focused on the education aspect of his degree, working as a substitute teacher in Minneapolis before teaching at an outdoor education camp in New Mexico.

But at that camp in 1997, Salas rediscovered his desire to paint.

TAKING A BITE OF THE BIG APPLE

For a time, his desire outpaced his ability, as he moved to New York to learn at the New York Academy of Art.

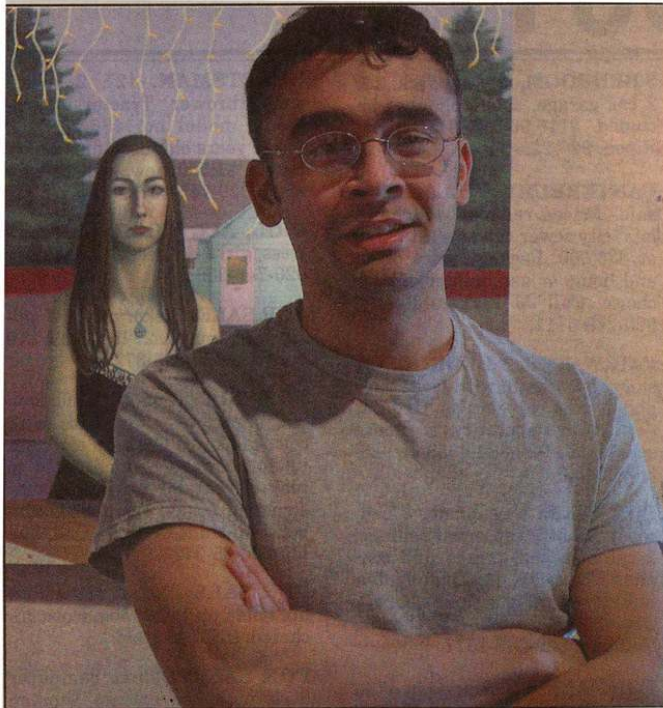
"At first, I made a lot, a lot of really bad paintings," he admitted. "But by the end, I made better paintings."

The process was "invigorating," he said. "I could see the product; I could see the paintings getting better."

His work belied his travels, including the short time he lived in London, as well as his semester studying art in Italy.

"I got to see great Renaissance art, see the masters ... It sort of sunk in," he said.

After dabbling in several other genres of art, he settled into what he refers to as "magical realism": images based on everyday scenes but with a surreal edge to them.



RAFAEL SALAS STANDS in front of an untitled work at Ripon College's Caestecker Art Gallery. *Ian Stepleton photo*

Some are still lifes of common images — beer cans, a serene forest — while others are portraits.

"I realized how the human figure and realistic styles really work for me," Salas said. "When you use the human figure, it becomes more democratic. It's an immediate human connection [with those looking at the work] and they can read those stories right away."

MEMORIES

Salas also chose to keep his topics close to his heart.

"They're pretty personal," he said. "I used to make work that was more outward looking and topical. But in the last six or seven years, I realized my best work comes from stuff close to me."

Part of what makes them so personal is how the brushstrokes recall images burned into Salas' memory.

"If there's an overriding theme [in my work], it's issues dealing with memory and nostalgia, which give the paintings an overly sweet feeling," he said.

In an essay about his collection, Salas explained, "My memories are ideal visions. They are beautiful to the point of pain, full of abundant magic. Upon reflection, they are riddled with subtext, beauty shot through with secrets and lies."

HOME AGAIN

In a sense, Friday's opening will be a bearing of his soul for Salas, who is excited to share his passion with the city that helped forge it.

"I really haven't returned to Ripon too much since I grew up," said Salas, who now works as a university professor in Milwaukee when not painting. "I think it's neat. I've been in touch with some of my teachers; keeping that relationship is important to me. They really are an important inspiration to my work."

"... The best response I can imagine is if people leave and it haunts them. If they can gather some emotions from my paintings and it sticks with them, that's all I can ask for."