

Ex-Tulsan returning for NatureWorks

He shifted from pottery to painting

BY JAMES D. WATTS JR.
World Scene Writer

When representatives of Tulsa's NatureWorks approached Matthew Higginbotham about being the Special Guest Artist for the organization's 2009 art show, Higginbotham was sure they had the wrong man.

"They had given me a brochure about the show, and I saw that all the artists depicted there were people who did wildlife art," Higginbotham said, speaking by phone from his New Mexico studio. "But I'm strictly a landscape painter. My work may have wildflowers on occasion, but not wildlife.

"Then I talked with someone I knew who was a landscape artist and had been in the show in the past. And he said he really liked doing the NatureWorks show because his paintings had a tendency to stand out a bit because they weren't like most of the other work."

But what convinced Higginbotham to accept the invitation was the fact the show would be in Tulsa — the city where Higginbotham's interest in art began.

"Both my parents are from Tulsa," he said. "We were living in Colorado when they divorced, and I moved with my mother to Tulsa, where she taught English at Holland Hall for a while."

Higginbotham's mother also enrolled her son in a pottery class at what is now the Philbrook Museum of Art, and he immediately discovered a love of working with clay. It ultimately grew into a business, Northwest Pottery and Fine Arts, with Higginbotham creating at first functional, then purely decorative ceramic pieces.

By the mid-1990s, he had developed a series of large-scale platters — three to four feet across and weighing as much as 50 pounds.

"They sold well, but it was back-breaking work," he recalled, laughing. "I had to wear a back brace just to be able to wrestle these big slabs around. Then one day it occurred to me that these platters were a bit like canvases, and that putting the glazes on them was like painting."

exhibit

NATUREWORKS ANNUAL ART SHOW AND SALE

When: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday
Where: Renaissance Tulsa Hotel and Conference Center, 6808 S. 107th East Ave.
Admission: \$5

NatureWorks

More than 60 nationally known artists will have their works on display as part of the NatureWorks Art Show and Sale. John Phelps is this year's Featured Artist. Laura Mark-Finberg, last year's Featured Artist, returns as Encore Artist, and former Tulsan Matthew Higginbotham is Special Guest Artist. Proceeds from the NatureWorks show help support the organization's wide-ranging activities to preserve and promote wildlife conservation.

Higginbotham went out and purchased some oil paints and a huge piece of watercolor paper, and began working on his first painting.

"It took me about an hour to do it," he said, "and I immediately fell in love with the immediacy of painting, the color and the texture. I still love ceramic work, but I was getting a little tired of the physical demands of the form — the weight of the pieces, the heat of the kiln."

"That first painting was a revolutionary experience for me. I knew I had found the right medium."

Within 72 hours, he had put his pottery works up for sale and set about remaking himself as a painter. He spent a year developing his skills, then — drawn by a fascination with the Southwest — moved to New Mexico. It took him a while to get established, trying out various subject matter and making ends meet by running a bed-and-breakfast inn in the region.

"I did some architectural things — churches, pueblos — and I did some portrait work, like making paintings from Edward Curtis' photographs," he said. "But I was always drawn to the land-

scape and after a while, that become all that I painted. I'm so fortunate to live in a place where everyday I can look out and see something that inspires me."

Higginbotham's work is gaining in national prominence. He is to be featured in the April issue of Southwest Art, and his work was part of the 2008 "American Art in Miniature" show at Gilcrease Museum.

But coming for the NatureWorks show will be his first return to Tulsa in many years.

"I'm looking forward to getting back and seeing the town," he said. "I know I'm going to want to visit Gilcrease and Philbrook — go back to the place where it all began."

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"Late Autumn Grasses" by Matthew Higginbotham. "I was always drawn to the landscape," he said.



Matthew Higginbotham, NatureWorks special guest artist. Courtesy

'I'm looking forward to getting back and seeing the town. I know I'm going to want to visit Gilcrease and Philbrook — go back to the place where it all began.'

MATTHEW HIGGINBOTHAM

Special Guest Artist for the NatureWorks 2009 art show

IDOL:

Breitzke says he's OK with looking awkward at times.

FROM D1

Only three singers from each group of 12 will move ahead each week. Three others will get a shot at joining the final 12 through a last-chance wild-card round.

Another challenge might be those choreographed song-and-dance routines the contestants do each week to

fill time on the show — not his strong suit, he admitted.

"I'll be the first one to tell you I'm not much of a dancer," he said. "I'm sure I'll look awkward out there — but it's OK."

If Breitzke makes the top 12 or goes even further — chalk one up for the regular guys. The crowd at 71st Street Depot will be among those rooting for him.

"He's really, really down to earth," said Meyer of the 71st Street Depot. "I know a lot of people are watching him out here."

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