

Columbus Alive

Susan Danko returns to Columbus with “Landscape Re-imagined” exhibit

By Jesse Tigges

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Susan Danko, Floor of the Forest, Acrylic on Canvas 46”x 60”

It’s been nearly 10 years since Cleveland-based visual artist Susan Danko had a solo exhibition in Columbus, and she makes a triumphant return with the collection she’ll have on display at downtown’s Angela Meleca Gallery. “Landscape Re-Imagined” offers a comprehensive look at Danko’s style and subject matter, while also showcasing the different mediums she works in.

Danko is primarily a painter, but she’s also created print work and large-scale installations. (The most recent of those was the 12-foot piece “Debris Cloud” at the Riffe Gallery’s “Sky High” exhibit that ended in October.)

“Landscape Re-Imagined” will be mainly occupied by paintings and prints, with a small-scale version of “Debris Cloud” also on display. The goal is to have an exhibit that’s inclusive of Danko’s work, but also distinctive as a whole.

“I’m planning on showing a number of small pieces and putting them in groupings so they’ll fill walls. And there will be some large [pieces] to have a nice range of things,” Danko said during a phone interview in mid-November. “I think the Angela Meleca Gallery has the tendency to show larger [works] and I don’t know how often she shows small. So it’ll distinguish me that way too.”

Danko’s two-dimensional works are semi-abstractions of nature landscapes. She takes traditional nature settings — usually inspired by hikes at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park or just meandering around the woods on her property — and abstracts the setting while maintaining the landscape environment.

“I like abstraction a lot, and I want to put that in my paintings,” she said. “But at the same time I really like the landscape so I’m trying to marry the two somehow. I just want to do something that’s interesting and a little bit different.

“In a way, I’m trying to show nature in its entirety. I really like the universal things that you see in nature; it could be a tree trunk or a ripple in the water. You see these patterns that repeat [and] a lot of patterns based on nature lends itself to print-making ideas as well. So it all sort of relates to my interests.”

Danko’s most appealing approach is how she replaces the earth tones often associated with the woods or nature with a vibrant color palette and an enigmatic aesthetic.

“I really like to play with color,” Danko said. “It’s something I’m really interested in. I like to push a palette as far as I can into crazy colors. Part of the enjoyment in painting is playing with color relationships. I like this idea of these mysterious, or mystical, things happening. The painting I’m working on now has this, ‘What’s going on there?’ element. And I like that.”

The exhibition will also feature many works Danko has completed in the last couple of (eventful) years. In 2013, Danko was awarded the Individual Excellence Award and Fine Arts Work Center Residency in Provincetown, Massachusetts by the Ohio Arts Council. She spent the summer working in Provincetown, a peninsula of Cape Cod completely surrounded by the ocean, which offered Danko a new environment for inspiration. While the different settings — beach community and wooded forest — are diverse subject matters, Danko said the pieces work cohesively in the exhibit.

“It’s something I wanted to include, and I just have to figure out a way to install them so they work with the rest of the pieces,” Danko said. “I really just have to get the work in the gallery and start organizing it. I did both prints and paintings inspired by Provincetown. I really tried for all the work to make sense together because at the end of the residency I was given a solo show. And it was kind of easy because I was there by myself and thinking about it 24-7 so it all did make sense together.”

For Danko, her approach and style are really borne out of her personal interests. She finds the process of painting to be utterly enjoyable and chose (semi-abstracted) landscapes because she was trying to distinguish herself. Then she realized all she needed to do so was embrace her passions.

“It makes perfect sense to me,” Danko said. “When I was in art school, I remember feeling overwhelmed because everyone was making something. And I wanted to make sure I was making something that no one else was already doing. I needed to find something that’s me in this whole thing. I started thinking about my interests outside of art and it was easy. It’s so easy. You paint what you love. You paint what you know.”