

THE ARTS



Art Nations' "The Snowmen" is on display at AMSET through Nov. 13.



Photos by Andy Coughlan



NATIONS AMSET EXHIBIT ADDS LAYERS OF DEPTH TO 'SNOWMEN'

by **Andy Coughlan**
BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE

The snowman is an iconic image synonymous with holiday cheer. But for artist Art Nations, the snowman symbolizes the temporary nature of human existence.

"I see the snowman, often as surrogates for ourselves," he said. "They often interact with their environment or with the others. In certain situations, they have various confrontations. Or they're isolated and apart from each other. I think we ourselves we find ourselves in similar situations."

Nations has been painting and drawing snowmen since 1983, and a cross section of his work is on display in "The Snowmen" in the Art Museum of Southeast Texas' Café Arts through Nov. 13.

Although all the images on display are snowmen, Nations is constantly experimenting with style and media, using charcoal graphite,

acrylic, ink and Conté crayons in a variety of ways.

"Often, the medium you use will actually steer the imagery," he said. "I kind of like that experimentation."

The Houston native graduated from Lamar University in 1979 and did his post-graduate studies at the University of Arkansas Fayetteville and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was at the Art Institute that he painted his first snowmen.

"They began as very minimalist," he said, "They were basically three very loose circles atop each other, and the end I painted these in cool whites against warm whites or the opposite of that. But I developed them as more concrete more snowmen and less abstract."

Although the snowmen are a Christmas and holiday motif, Nations said he tries to take a more serious approach, more objective although they are imaginary.

Being from Houston, Nations said he remembers the excitement when it would snow as it was so infrequent.

"It would snow maybe every seven years, it was really really

something special to see snow on the ground in Houston, so that it was a real treat," he said. "Then that one semester I was at the school of the Art Institute I saw lots of snow then and it must have really made an impression on me."

After he finished his first snowman painting, "A History," Nations recalled Andrew Wyeth's iconic masterpiece "Christina's World."

"I realized that I had done 'Christina's World' in reverse," he said. "Christina is facing her past, present and future, and her fears and desires. She's looking toward that house and barn. With my painting, 'A History,' the past is in the distance — the flag — and the weather and vigorous architecture in the background. And the snowman is the present. He's facing away from the history and the future is outside of the picture."

The various images in the exhibition have titles such as "Vigilance," "Fallen and Awakened (with tracks)" and "Doubt." They convey the full range of the human experience. "Frozen/Separated" has a real poignancy as the two

snowmen are separated from each other, and one's arm is literally separated from himself.

The snowman is part of the fabric of human history. No one knows when the first snowman was built, Nations said, but they were first documented in the 1300s in manuscripts. Like us, they melt away only to be replaced as the seasons change. For all his philosophical musings, Nations laughed as he speaks about a personal connection.

"In a way, humorously, somewhat on the personal side, I almost relate to the snowman," he said. "I'm a rather short statured man, and I'm about the height of an ordinary snowman. And I somehow, physically, almost in a symbolic way, I can relate to them."

Whether short or tall, viewers will find much to relate to in "The Snowmen." Nations' images have warmth and depth that compel one to meditate on our fate. Frosty would approve.

A free artist reception will be held 2-4 p.m., Nov. 6. AMSET is located at 500 Main St. in Beaumont. For information, visit www.amset.org.

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