

## ART FOR ALL

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Famous for his prolific output and paintings sold at thrift-store prices long after his work started being shown in galleries around the world, Steve Keene's new exhibit at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW in Fort Myers is one of his largest-scale projects to date

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JUST TWO WEEKS BEFORE A major exhibition at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers, Steve Keene still had not produced any actual art for it. Which is not to say he was unprepared; this, of course, was the plan. When he arrived in town on Good Friday from his home in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, the gallery already had 50 sheets of plywood ready for him to begin a massive commissioned installation, “57 Miles or 455 Furlongs,” made up of hand-painted duplicate images that stretch 8 by 200 feet in length.

The exhibition opens with a public reception from 6 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, April 12, and runs through June 9.

This is hardly unfamiliar territory for Mr. Keene, born in 1957, an internationally known artist who estimates that he has “sold or given away” more than 300,000 paintings in the last 35 years. It’s impossible to verify that astonishing number, but he has also suggested that he views installations made up of thousands of paintings or even his career as a single work. He has been dubbed “World’s Most Prolific Painter” as well as in 1998 in Time magazine the “Assembly Line Picasso.” At one stint at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2000, he flew through 10,000 paintings in two months. The name of this installation in Fort Myers indicates the 57 miles he estimates his work since the 1990s would take up if placed end to end.



Brooklyn-based artist Steve Keene at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW in Fort Myers paints images for a large-scale installation that opens on April 12. COURTESY PHOTO



Mr. Keene's works have also filled numerous indie-rock album covers and tour posters for groups such as Pavement, Soul Coughing and the Dave Matthews Band. He is energized by the idea that many of his paintings have been sold for the price of a used record album, \$5 or \$10 or less, and could go "directly from studio to Salvation Army" — that you could find his paintings amidst the junk, beautiful and cheap. Most artists do end up in obscurity and even though Mr. Keene has not, his work remains an homage to the unsung, with many of his individual pieces in the hands of the far-flung masses, and maybe a few thrift stores as well.



Artist Steve Keene insists, "The images aren't that important." COURTESY PHOTO

With his machine-like prolificacy, he calls to mind Andy Warhol (whose work he called “liberating”) as much as Picasso. But unlike Warhol, who is known for screen-printing, Mr. Keene paints each duplicate by hand, his strokes fast and sure, seemingly engrained in his muscle memory after decades of repetition. And unlike nearly every artist whose work has made the leap to museums and galleries, the paintings he produces on a daily basis out of his studio in Brooklyn, done in the same hand-painted manner as this installation, have remained resolutely cheap.

During a 12-minute documentary showing him in 1998 in New York, a cardboard sign advertising his work reads: “If you do not buy it now it will be a lot cheaper by the end of the month.”

These days he likes to finish his paintings ASAP and get them in the mail right away; a recent special on his website advertises a “randomly selected” assortment of six paintings for \$70 (including shipping).

“To me it’s about the democratization of art,” said Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger.

The rise of the internet accelerated that idea, though Mr. Keene has championed it for decades — work that embraces art as a mass-produced entertainment instead of rarified, exclusive objects.

So, by April 3 at the Rauschenberg Gallery on the Florida SouthWestern State College campus, his installation was rapidly taking shape as students now and then passed by for a look.

Mr. Keene was up to his usual rigorous workday routine, in painting after painting layering bold colors that popped off and danced across the plywood.

The site-specific images were taken from an old art book he’d found in the Rauschenberg Gallery office when he got here; the name of a 19th century Western landscape painter, Albert Bierstadt, appears on many of the paintings.

But he insists, “The images aren’t that important.”

He’s more interested in the color patterns and to a larger extent losing himself in the process of painting, the “physical and mental rhythm” of churning out one after another.

After changing out of his painting clothes for an interview, he took a reflective glance at what he had painted, looking both mildly unsettled and happily in wonder as he observed that the “line” and stroke of his paintings has remained essentially unchanged for decades, years that have carried him to exhibits from New York to Los Angeles, London to Melbourne.

Mr. Keene grew up outside Washington, D.C. and attended Yale University.

His childhood was “fine,” he says.

As for Yale and how his experience there may have affected his work, he shrugged. “You get out of it what you put in to it.” (He also admits he’s not a big talker).

Among his influences and inspirations, he is at least as enthusiastic about his youthful job as a restaurant dishwasher, the hard labor and repetitious rhythms it required, as he is about minimalist mid-20th century works of artists such as Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt. Mr. Rauschenberg is also an artist he admires.

“It’s just amazing that I’m here in a place that had important exhibits of his work,” he said.

The title of Mr. Keene’s installation, “57 Miles or 455 Furlongs,” is an homage to Mr. Rauschenberg’s old retrospective “The Mile or 2 Furlong Piece,” which premiered here at the same gallery in the 1980s.

Mr. Keene recalled the year he turned 19, one of his first close encounters with Mr. Rauschenberg’s work. He attended a retrospective in Washington, D.C., where he viewed one of the late artist’s famous early “combines.”

“Monogram” featured a stuffed Angora goat that Mr. Rauschenberg had bought at a second-hand store encircled by a rubber tire.

“I remember I went up and blew the fur on the goat with the tire around it,” Mr. Keene said. |

**>> What: “Steve KEENE: 57 Miles or 455 Furlongs”**

**>> When: April 12–June 9**

**>> Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW, 8099 College Parkway, Fort Myers**

**>> Details: Opening to the public with a reception for the artist on Thursday, April 12, from 6–8 p.m.**

**>> Bob Rauschenberg Gallery is open Monday–Friday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Closed Sundays and holidays.**

**>> More information: 489-9313**