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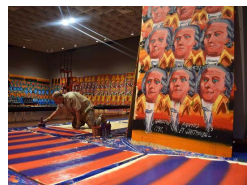
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No art? No problem. Steve Keene exhibit opens anyway at Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers

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Internationally renowned artist Robert Rauschenberg lived in Captiva Island since the 1970s, continuing his work as an artist and philanthropist until his death in 2008. Video produced by Juan Buitrago/news-press.com



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The exhibit was just two weeks away, but artist Steve Keene hadn't finished a single painting.

Not *one*.

Was he worried? Not really. This happens all the time for Keene.

It's kind of his thing.

TIME magazine once called Keene "The Assembly-Line Picasso." And here's why: Wherever he has an art exhibit, the Brooklyn artist usually shows up empty-handed. Then he cranks out all his paintings in a matter of weeks — sometimes days — one after the other in assembly-line fashion.

Some artists might get stressed out about a looming deadline and all those art lovers who will show up expecting to see, you know, *art*. But Keene says he's used to it.

"I've been working this way for 25 years," he says. "And I used to be kinda uptight: 'Oh, I can't do something like this because I might *break* my arm four days before the show.'"

The Rauschenberg Gallery exhibit did open on time, though — although Keene was still working on a painting halfway through the opening reception on April 12. The result: A roomful of colorful, over-sized art painted on plywood and inspired by a battered old art book Keene happened to find in the gallery office.



Steve Keene's art covers the Rauschenberg Gallery walls and floor before the opening of the artist's exhibit. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

And so what if Keene really *had* broken his arm before opening day? The artist says he'd planned for that, too.

"I realized, 'Hey, it's a college. We've got all the materials here,'" he says. "If I can't do it, then I'm sure students would like to just express themselves for a week in here. So there's always something you can do."

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Keene is famous for this kind of thing, and also for the posters and album covers he's painted for rock bands such as Pavement, The Apples in Stereo, Soul Coughing and The Dave Matthews Band.

In fact, the internationally acclaimed artist feels more connected to rock bands than he does to the fine-art community. And he thinks that art — like rock albums — should be affordable for the masses and sold for as little as \$5 or \$10.

That's why he paints so quickly. The less time it takes to make a painting, the cheaper he can price it.



Picasso paintings in an art book inspired Steve Keene to paint these images at Rauschenberg Gallery. (Photo: Charles Runnells)

"My friends were all in bands when I started out," Keene says. "And it was just the hard life of a musician, traveling around and trying to sell their CDs. You'd bring a box of CDs to the show and hope they'd sell 10 of them."

"And I used to do that 25 years ago. I'd bring my paintings to bars in New York. And if I priced them at 2,3,4 dollars, I'd have some money and I wouldn't have to bring them home. And I'd have enough money to buy more paint and wood the next day."

Gallery director Jade Dellinger says it's been inspiring

watching Keene work. The artist turned an empty gallery into a roomful of art in just 12 days.

"He is unbelievable," Dellinger says. "I think he's a terribly important artist who's dealing with a lot of issues that we like to see addressed, like the democratization of art."



Steve Keene created all of the art for his Rauschenberg Gallery exhibit in less than two weeks. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Still, Keene admits that his methods aren't only about democratizing art. He just likes to work that way.

"It's as much for me as it is for other people," he says. "I like to paint fast, and I like to paint a LOT."

The title of his Fort Myers exhibit — "57 Miles or 455 Furlongs" — refers to gallery

namesake Robert Rauschenberg and his sprawling "The ¼ Mile or 2 Furlong Piece" (which world-premiered at the gallery in the early 80s). The late Captiva Island artist kept adding to the work over the years, Dellinger says, and eventually hoped its length would match the quarter mile and two furlongs in its title.

Keene remembers seeing that famous piece in a Washington D.C. exhibit when he was a teenager. And like Rauschenberg with "The ¼ Mile," Keene views his own body of work as one long, continuous piece instead of a bunch of individual paintings.

Dellinger and Keene did the calculations: If you add all of Keene's paintings together — roughly 300,000 of them in the last 25 years, at about 1 foot wide each (or more) — that comes out to about 57 miles or 455 furlongs.



Steve Keene finishes a painting while guests mingle at the opening reception for his Rauschenberg Gallery exhibit. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

"It's not like I'm trying to reinvent painting," Keene says. "For me, my art and what's original and personal to me is just the sheer volume and kinda the repetition and the decoration."

"I feel like I'm in a food store or something like that, a 7-Eleven. If you look at it, it's magnificent, the amount of colors and patterning."

His "cavass" for the exhibit: 62 panels of 4-by-8-foot plywood. And he used mostly leftover paint from previous exhibits at the gallery, too.

The exhibit includes images of flowers, presidents and famous art pieces. His version of "The Blue Boy" — displaying a row of wealthy boys painted in red instead of Picasso's original blue — includes the cheeky phrase "THIS PICTURE IS FROM A BOOK."



One of Steve Keene's paintings at Rauschenberg Gallery (Photo: Charles Runnells)

Keene says he didn't have a single idea what he'd be painting when he arrived in Fort Myers. But then he saw that art book in the gallery office and drew inspiration from its pages.

"I haven't seen the book in about 20 years," Keene says. "Now I get most of my images from the internet. But before, I used to go to bookstores and get beat-up books for \$1 a piece and just rip'em up and paint from them.

"And this is a book that I worked from many, many years ago. I saw it, and it's like, 'Wow.' It's like seeing a photograph of an old friend or something."

Keene says he tries not to think too much about WHAT he paints and the specific subjects, though. For him, that's almost irrelevant.

"The idea of the artwork is not what I'm painting," he says. "It's just finding something that is sort of a structure that I can react to."



Steve Keene's exhibit opened April 12 at Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers, (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

For Keene, it's more about working quickly and not overthinking it.

"I like to create," he says, "and I don't like to judge myself. Because sometimes that ends up getting rid of a lot of experimentation and a lot of good things that you do.

"For me, this is like cooking or something. You don't kill yourself if you made a lousy meal. You just make the next one tomorrow."

Connect with this reporter: Charles Runnells (Facebook), @charlesrunnells (Twitter), @crunnells1 (Instagram)

If you go

What: "Steve Keene: 57 Miles or 455 Furlongs" exhibit

When: Now through June 9

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway S.W., Building L, south Fort Myers

Admission: Free

Gallery hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday.

Info: 489-9313 or rauschenberggallery.com