

EXHIBIT KENY GALLERIES

Shore things

Small paintings capture details of nature near rivers

Sunday, □ April 20, 2008 3:51 AM

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For THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Stephen Pentak has always found inspiration for his paintings in nature, whether in his backyard or the rivers of the West where he fly-casts for trout.

The constancy of his inspiration and the originality in his expression can be seen in his latest work, on view in "Stephen Pentak: The Snake River and Other Sources" at Keny Galleries. Pentak, a professor emeritus of art and former associate dean of the College of the Arts at Ohio State University, is known for his abstract renderings of panoramic landscapes. The exhibit includes XII.IX, with its contemplative ambiguity of imagery. Such works contrast with the newer paintings -- including I.III, a quiet landscape in which a new dynamism is created by broken horizontal lines of background trees playfully reflecting luminous waters. In the foreground, the stiffness of a leafless tree is challenged by the inverted "V" formed by hanging branches. Past and present, Pentak's watery landscapes are created with large brushes and palette knives, whose marks reveal how the paintings were executed. Only a few such panoramic landscapes are included. Instead, the focus of the exhibit is on a series of square paintings -- some as small as 14 by 14 inches -- that Pentak describes as "details of riverside views, trees and reeds." These have unexpected spontaneity and would seem to have been painted quickly. In fact, like the large landscapes, they were painted at leisure from drawings and photographs.

And, like the panoramic works, the small images were built chromatically, layer by layer of pure paint -- beginning with a base of yellow that emerges sporadically to give depth and vibrancy to the surface. In the exquisitely luminous I.XVI, the layers are allowed to show on the edge of the image, adding intriguing tension. The tiny scenes reveal Pentak's interest in Japanese screens decorated with willow branches, leaves and blossoms. Working with brushes, palette knives and abundant paint, he places these images in the foreground of paintings such as XII.X and I.I, giving the works a rich textural quality. Two works are quite different from the rest: I.II extends beyond a foreground twig with leaves into a hazy, distant view of hills. II.I focuses on a close-up of stones and willow shoots crowded into a shallow space. The stones have surprising weight and volume -- rare for objects in Pentak's paintings. The artist's ability to transform brush marks and abstract designs into poetically contemplative images is enchanting.

- "Stephen Pentak: The Snake River and Other Sources" continues through May 7 in Keny Galleries, 300 E. Beck St. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays and by appointment. Call 614-464-1228 or visit .