

## Augusta museum features work of emerging figurative artist

“Cold accuracy is not art. Skillful invention, when it is pleasing or expressive, is art itself.” So wrote Eugene Delacroix in his journal in 1850, and these words penned by the great French painter known for his large canvases crowded with people captured in moments of high drama somehow rang true for a young American pictorial realist trying to find his way in the art world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As a student at the New York Academy of Art, the first graduate school in the country devoted exclusively to the study of the human figure, Bryan LeBoeuf was poised to take advantage of the contemporary groundswell of interest in figurative art. In both formal and informal study, he had plenty of exemplars from which to choose; old masters of the visual image like Velazquez, Delacroix, Millet and Degas and new masters like painter Chuck Close and filmmaker Terrence Malick.

To his New York experience, LeBoeuf also brought his own Louisiana upbringing, including a strong Catholic penchant for seeing the world in symbolic terms, and the traditional Southern preference for storytelling. Both of these factors came into play when LeBoeuf, born in 1975, faced the challenge of finding his own “eye”, placing his own personal mark on the genre of visual realism.

According to his own admission during a luncheon lecture at the Morris Museum on Aug. 1, the artist made a conscious decision, when he

felt himself ready to find his own path, to increase the level of technical difficulty in his work and to explore the rich possibilities inherent in narrative.

Take, for example, the 2003 oil entitled “On the Road” in which two men in a red vehicle navigate a country thoroughfare. In this particular work,

LeBoeuf faced the challenge of depicting figures as seen through a tinted windshield; such technical mastery alone would impress the viewer if it were not for the additional element of mystery that the artist supplies. Both men, in fact, are gazing upward, beyond the picture plane, at something the viewer can only imagine. Is it a flock of birds; is it a flying saucer? Who knows?

LeBoeuf enhances the drama of the moment by placing the seated figures in the foreground (it’s as if the viewer were perched on the hood of the vehicle); the craned necks and open-mouthed stares of both men are clearly evident even in the oblique illumination of the truck’s interior. To the left of the vehicle is a ramshackle farm shed framed by fence posts all akimbo; that spot of darkness set against the purple haze of the overcast sky, which sweeps across the top of the canvas in a horizontal band, creates an ominous backdrop to the central action.



**DR. TOM MACK**



**Bryan LeBoeuf’s painting entitled “Trois Bateaux” or “Three Boats” is on display at the Morris Museum in Augusta.**

Lighting also plays a critical role in perhaps my favorite painting in this temporary exhibition of 10 works. In “Trois Bateaux” or “Three Boats”, a large-scale oil, about 5-by-8 feet, two teenagers interact with each other and a small skiff in the foreground while just behind them a wrecked houseboat floats half-submerged in the shadow of a stand of mangrove trees and behind that, in the sun-dappled water of a larger body of water beyond the enclosed bay, a silhouetted vessel floats.

The foreground figures, a teenaged boy and girl, are cast in overhead light. He is balanced precariously on the skiff, one hand on the wharf, his face turned away from the viewer as he looks behind toward the girl. She sits on the deck, one foot on the open boat. The attention of the viewer and that of the boy are focused on his female companion, who looks intently at her bare foot.

Is she attempting to steady the craft for her male companion or is she making his task more difficult? The abandoned vessel just behind the couple would indicate that their relationship may indeed be a troubled one. This particular tableau could very well illustrate the artist’s own contention that much of life’s memorable moments are about “fixing the problems that you yourself have created”

The exhibition entitled “Realist Paintings by Bryan LeBoeuf” will be on display at the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta until Sept. 28. The “oldest and largest museum in the country devoted to the art and artists of the South,” the Morris is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. For more information, call (706) 724-7501 or visit the museum’s website at [www.themorris.org](http://www.themorris.org).

*Dr. Mack is the Carolina Trustee Professor at USC Aiken.*