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# Retired CMC CEO Mackenzie has first solo painting exhibition

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**By Arthur Whitman**

*Tompkins Weekly*

ITHACA – Visual art in Ithaca belongs mostly to talented amateurs. It’s not unusual to find a skilled painter or printmaker also distinguished in some other field. Such is the case with Rob Mackenzie, who is better known for his work as a surgeon and hospital administrator. Since retiring in 2012 from his position as president and CEO of Cayuga Medical Center he has renewed his longstanding passion for oil painting.

A selection of Mackenzie’s recent pieces on canvas and board remains up through the end of the month at Decorum Too in the DeWitt Mall. This is his first solo exhibit and, as with all shows at the rug store, the presentation is informal.

Focusing on natural and urban landscapes – with the occasional lone figure or crowd – they reveal a well traveled individual with an impressive grasp of painterly structure and light. Scenes re-imagine the artist’s sojourns to Italy, France, England, Thailand, and Indonesia as well as the American West.

A woman reclines on a low wall at the foreground of Brunelleschi’s Cloister, which depicts a courtyard outside the Pazzi Chapel in Florence, Italy: a major Early Renaissance work traditionally credited to the pioneering architect Filippo Brunelleschi. One leg raised and bent, her head rests likewise, propped up on a bulky bag. The bag is itself curiously anthropomorphic as it leans against a tall column close to – and paralleling – the right edge.

She fits her setting perhaps too well, like an ornamental sculpture. She appears asleep. The background architecture – fat arches, stacked colonnades – appears in dramatic perspective but with their washed out color they fail to generate much visual drama. Mackenzie’s talent as a painter is structural and architectonic – even his scenes of nature seem meticulously built up. Although there’s little direct evidence of it here, it’s not an approach that seems well suited to straight up portraiture. He is more assured in his pictures of urban crowds. Seine River Boat and Leatherworking District (the latter returns us to Florence) are eloquent studies of light and dark, masses and massing. They share a similar composition with low diagonals marking out perspectival foreground areas – mostly shadowed in respite from the sunlit haze that dominates above.

A larger painting, displayed (like several here) on easel, Île de la Cité is the exhibit’s most striking work. Gathered in the foreground of the Parisian park scene, the artist has placed a disparate ground of people poised in uncertain relationship to each other. Painted in coarse but finicky strokes using varied, dark colors, they stand (and sit) against odd horizontal bands of bright yellow. They appear both anonymous and yet individual.

A canopy of dark foliage, painted in aggressive stabs, hangs from above. Brown verticals, marking a fat tree trunk and slender posts bearing signs and lights, echo the figure’s legs. Pale, clay colored buildings in the vague distance block out the sky. It’s an odd scene: marking an unlikely stasis, an indeterminate time of the day.

Not all of Mackenzie’s work portrays distant sights. First Friday, 2015 suggests the abandon of a local night on the town with its tipsy smudges draping his customary sense of structure. The image captures a stretch of East State Street familiar to local gallery goers: facing, to the left and at an off-angle, the Community School of Music and Arts and looking off into the hazy distance at the Gateway Center. Blocks and blobs of piercing white light punctuate the dark brown and amber of the buildings and the enveloping nocturnal atmosphere. A silver car turns on to the street from the lower right, creating a jarring visual rhythm. The back of another car, a smear of hot red at middle distance, anchors the entire scene centrally.

Scattered about Decorum Too are a number of smaller paintings focusing on close-up details. In Hemlock View, the jagged light and dark leaves fit together like puzzle pieces, curtaining off anything distant. Slender dark branches suggest calm amidst their tension. Wavering at an angle distorts the bright patterns of an Archway Flag, which stands out crisply against an ochre wall and the dull purple arch. An indoor scene, Chapel Candles contrasts a nighttime window view at left with, to the right, an ornate candelabra bearing soft globes of bright white electric light.

I was reminded here of the work of Cornell art professor Stan Taft, who showed a selection of his landscape oils locally at Corners Gallery this past summer as part of a two-person show with Suzanne Onodera (also a local painter). The combination of meticulously built-up blocks of color with more amorphous tonal sweeps is kindred, as are the exquisitely balanced lights and darks of Mackenzie’s best pieces here. (Taft’s obsessive and varied views of urban Italy, shown elsewhere, also represent a point of contact.)

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*Photo provided by Rob Mackenzie*  
*A view one of Rob Mackenzie’s painting, titled “Seine Riverboat,” that is part of an exhibition at Decorum Too.*

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