

Surreal art was accidentally inspired

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Artist Jeremiah Stermer says a near-fatal collision brought him a richer view of the world

BY GLENN MCNATT
[SUN ART CRITIC]

ARTIST JEREMIAH Stermer was doing the speed limit one night 30 years ago when the car in front of him suddenly pulled a U-turn right into his motorcycle's path.

The motorcycle hit the driver's-side door, flinging Stermer off and sending him flying over the car's hood into the curb on the far side of the street.

As he lay there, Stermer didn't see a white light with figures beckoning. He didn't hear voices. He was just floating in inky, black space. And it felt good.

"The blackness of space wasn't dead and empty but *fat* with life," Stermer recalls. "I felt completely safe because I knew I was made of the same stuff. I can only call it love, this material which had full awareness and went on to infinity. I felt peace."

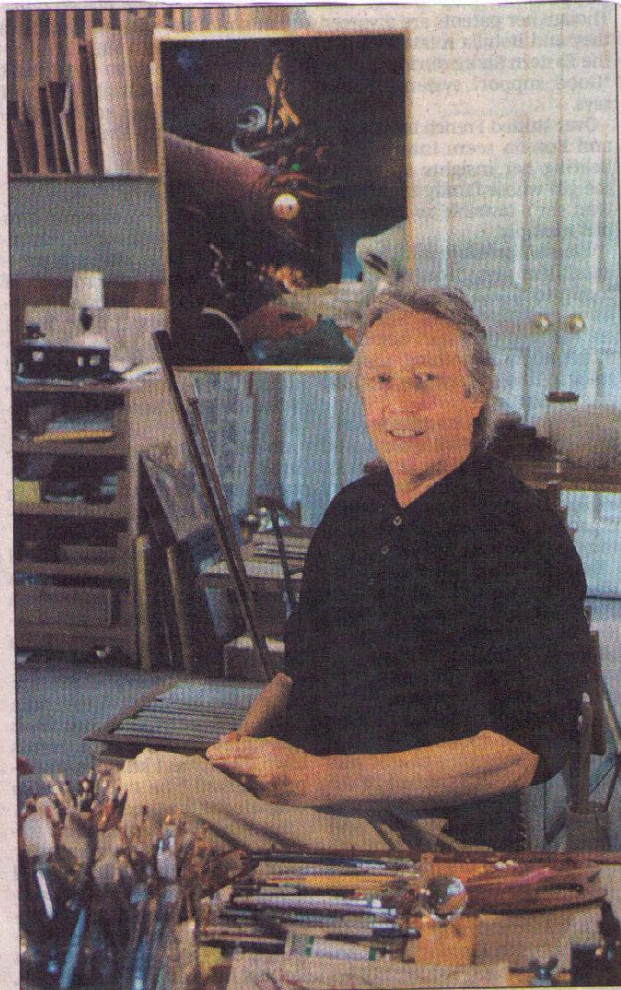
The next thing he knew, two neighborhood dogs were licking his face, pulling him back into his body from wherever he'd been. He got up and walked away with barely a scratch.

"After that I knew that there was this added dimension to life, a finer awareness of the things I see," Stermer says of his lucky escape. "After that, I was more intimate with the things I painted."

Call it a hallucination, a vision, an out-of-body, near-death experience: Whatever it was, it provided the inspiration for Stermer's surreal art, in which flowers and fruits levitate and potted plants dissolve like the Cheshire Cat's grin.

Making people happy

Now *The Elegant Surrealism of Jeremiah Stermer*, the artist's retrospective at University of Maryland University College, presents some 60 examples of a world that seems just enough like the one we live in to pass for real, only somehow clearer, sharper, more vivid and fresher than ours.



Jeremiah Stermer says his accident opened new doors for him.
BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Stermer, a 59-year-old Towson native who taught himself to paint while still in his teens (he studied graphic design for a few semesters at Maryland Institute College of Art before dropping out to join the National Guard in the 1960s), has always admired the meticulously precise, jewel-like realism of such minor 17th-century Dutch masters as Gerard Dou and Franz van Mieris, as well as the fantastic, more-real-

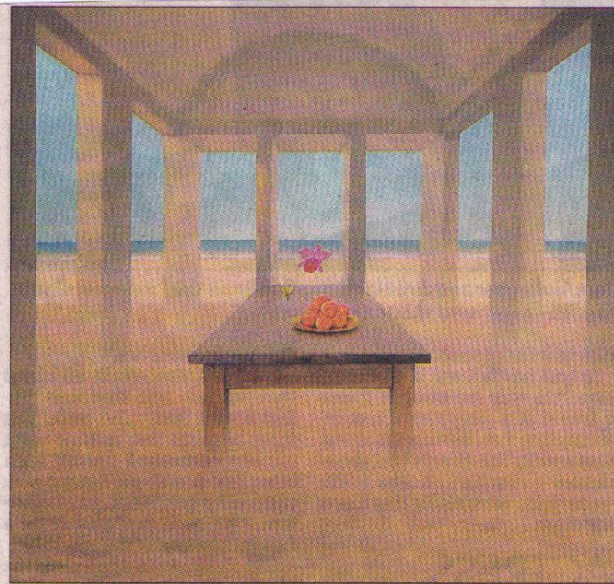
than-real visual fictions of 20th-century giants like Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte.

In his studio, he has at least a thousand different brushes of various sizes, which he uses to paint the seamless surfaces in his pictures with an obsessive attention to detail and an astonishing technical virtuosity that verges on the photographic.

But unlike Dali and Magritte, he's no fan of the tortured psy-

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SPOTLIGHT



"Gazebo" features Stermer's levitating, dissolving images.

COURTESY OF JEREMIAH STERMER

chological themes that modern surrealism explored during the 1920s and '30s to protest the dehumanizing effects of industrial civilization or the enslavement of the individual by giant bureaucracies.

Stermer wants his paintings to make people happy, pure and simple.

"It's easy to do dark, disturbing surrealism," he says. "What's hard to do is uplifting, positive surrealism. I like happy endings. For me, it's about warmth, optimism, because that's our core, that's God."

Glowing from within

Stermer's paintings have an uncanny, clear internal light that seems as much a living presence in his work as the fruits, flowers, plants and other exquisitely rendered objects that populate his canvases as recurring symbols of the joyous mystery of life.

In *Glass Table*, for example, a diminutive, oil-on-panel still life set in what looks like an ordinary room in an ordinary house, a perfect cherry and a spray of pink cut

flowers float weightlessly above a polished glass table top, which itself seems attached to no visible support.

A gossamer white curtain billows into the room from a window at left, yet the flowers and fruit seem undisturbed by whatever breeze is wafting through; a

mirror on the far wall seems preternaturally clear, yet reflects nothing of the room's interior.

The picture is a visual dissertation on a physical impossibility: effects without causes, consequences without actions. Everything in the picture is vibrant, animated — but how, and by whom?

It's a mystery that goes back to the one that Stermer experienced during the first few moments after his motorcycle accident — the mystery of a world awash in an infinite love that envelops everything it touches, like some cosmic amniotic fluid.

"I tell people I saw heaven," Stermer says of his experience. "In my painting, I want to touch that again, conjure it up, put it on the brush along with the paint. I want to invent ways of interpreting what I feel and know about it faster than my intellect can censor it."

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» THE ELEGANT SURREALISM OF JEREMIAH STERMER //

Arts Program Gallery of the Inn and Conference Center, University of Maryland University College, 3501 University Blvd. E., Adelphi / Through June 18 // 301-985-7937.