

NEWS RELEASE

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Natural Constructs, Acrylic Paintings on Shaped Canvases by Rob Brownlee-Tomasso, on View at Adkins Arboretum

Biking his favorite loop near his home in Denton, Rob Brownlee-Tomasso spotted a row of birds perched on a power line. It's a common sight on the Eastern Shore, but "Tree Swallows on a Wire," the painting it inspired, is not what you might expect. Part of his show *Natural Constructs*, on view in the Adkins Arboretum Visitor's Center through Oct. 30, these birds were painted in bold, sure strokes of acrylic, trimmed out along their edges right down to every spindly toe and pop riveted onto a slanting cobalt blue line on an oblong canvas encrusted with sand. There will be a reception to meet the artist and learn about his unorthodox techniques on Sat., Sept. 11 from 3 to 5 p.m.



Rob Brownlee-Tomasso, "Tuckahoe State Park (Creekside Cliffs)," acrylic and earth on canvas, 59" x 54"

An avid birder who loves biking and hiking, Brownlee-Tomasso is a keen observer of nature who always carries a sketchbook for making drawings and notes about what he sees along the way. But while his paintings are inspired by the birds, trees and glimpses of blue water of our familiar Eastern Shore landscapes, they don't just hang politely on the wall. Painted on large, decidedly un-rectangular shaped canvases, they are exuberant, colorful and full of drama. Textured with earth or sand he has collected on his travels and often incorporating an actual tree branch found along the way, they glitter with pop rivets or other bits of metal.

The inclusion of hardware in the paintings is startling and almost comic, but it also serves as an acknowledgement of the inevitable human presence in the landscape. There's quite a bit of humor in Brownlee-Tomasso's work and an obvious fondness for the natural world. Every bird, tree or plant has its own distinct personality, and, while never sentimental, each painting asserts its animated aliveness.

Along with drawings, his sketchbooks are scribbled with thoughts about what he has observed and notes on bird identification, as well as the bold color and composition studies that are preliminary to his larger paintings.

"I'm big on sketchbooks," he said. "I love pencil sketches and color studies, and when I go on vacation, I do vacation logs."

Although vacations may take them to more distant places such as Key West, Brownlee-Tomasso and his wife are frequent visitors to Adkins Arboretum and Tuckahoe State Park, as well as Pickering Creek Audubon Center, Solomons Island and Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, all places that appear in his paintings.

In "Tuckahoe State Park (Creekside Cliffs)," where occasional bits of hardware glint along the edge of a path winding along a stream, a branch he picked up in the park forms the left edge of the slanted canvas.

Brownlee-Tomasso began using branches in his paintings during a residency at Annemarie Garden on Solomons Island in 2014. He was building his canvases at the gallery when he realized he hadn't brought enough wood along.

"I thought I could use a branch for one of the edges and that would save me wood," he said. "I really liked it, so I carried it through on a bunch of paintings."

Incorporating branches and earth found in the places that inspire his work gives Brownlee-Tomasso's paintings a striking physicality that matches their audacious enthusiasm and disconcerting perspectives. Full of compressed energy, each of these paintings is like a captivating story unfolding before your eyes.

Natural Constructs is part of Adkins Arboretum's ongoing exhibition series of work on natural themes by regional artists. It is on view through Oct. 30 at the Arboretum Visitor's Center located at 12610 Eveland Road near Tuckahoe State Park in Ridgely. Contact the Arboretum at 410-634-2847, ext. 0 or info@adkinsarboretum.org for gallery hours.

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Adkins Arboretum is a 400-acre native garden and preserve at the headwaters of the Tuckahoe Creek in Caroline County. For more information, visit adkinsarboretum.org or call 410-634-2847, ext. 0.

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