

# Sumter County Gallery of Art in Sumter, SC, Features Works by Stephen Chesley

Sumter County Gallery of Art in Sumter, SC, is presenting *Stephen Chesley: Field, Trees, Sky*, on view through Apr. 19, 2019.

Chesley is a Southern regional artist living and working in Columbia, SC. He was born in Schenectady, NY, in 1952 and grew up in Virginia Beach in the late 1950's when Virginia Beach was still a seasonal resort. He was exposed to the 'Beat Generation' of musicians, artists, and writers. His art spirit burned bright throughout elementary and high school as he continued drawing and painting.

Growing up in Virginia Beach, Chesley longed to change the face of coastal development - It was here that he began his life long love affair with the Atlantic Ocean. In college he earned a degree in Urban Studies and a Masters in Urban Planning in 1980 from the School of Architecture at Clemson University. After graduating he worked briefly as a city planner, only to abandon the profession in frustration. Two of his favorite disciplines were science and art. The idea of combining the two led to city planning.

"My idea was to have centralized areas of development and areas of wildness along the coast. But the demand for palatial beach homes frustrated him". He notes, "There isn't any creativity in urban planning. That is why I got out of it."

Chesley threw his wristwatch away and spent five years painting mostly sea islands, swamps, and rivers without any consideration of time. A mostly self-taught artist, he immersed himself in his aesthetic subject matter and absorbed the influence of classical painters, such as George Inness, Albert Pinkham Ryder, J.M.W. Turner and Edward Hopper. "I lived by my natural biorhythms," he says. "I wanted to paint and still be free." It was this time, while painting in solitude with nature, that shaped Chesley's perspective on overpopulation and the fragility of the planet as it exists today. He found it increasingly difficult to achieve a sense of solitude in modern times, and he was gripped by a sense of urgency to paint landscapes, to record their unspoiled beauty for posterity.



Work by Stephen Chesley

culture of conspicuous consumption.

Critics have described Chesley's landscapes as "dark and moody." And the artist acknowledges he uses a darker, earthy palette of natural umbers and ochres. "You need to stay true to the art." While Chesley's paintings are realistic and representative, they often have an abstract quality. He combines colors of similar values and avoids sharp lines, forcing the viewer to study the soft-edged planes to discover what they represent.

Though he primarily paints landscapes, he seldom paints via plein air any more. One reason is the increasingly crowded planet, "I used to paint early in the morning when there was nobody around." These days, he often does field sketches or takes photographs and later paints at home or in the studio. Over the years, however, Chesley has discovered painting from memory to be the best method because, "when you remember, you remember why the place was important - not how it looked but how it felt."

In many scenes, the flames of a distant nighttime fire or the dramatic backlighting of the sun behind dark clouds seize the canvas, making it seem to glow from an inner light. He uses the technique to create a sense of "temporal ambiguity" that can leave the viewer unsure whether it's morning or evening, coming or going.

Chesley often titles his paintings using a straight forward descriptive - 'twilight' or 'trees, field' - a one-line haiku. He states, "You don't know whether the day is starting or ending. You see the tree, but when you get up close to it, you see it's an abstraction. That is something I strive for. I really don't want to paint the tree, per se, I am after a narrative."

Although he likes his solitude, Chesley is not antisocial. He's charming and easy to laugh. He navigates the obligatory crush of fund-raisers and openings, "In a social situation, I listen more. I don't talk that much because there is no point in talking about overpopulation stuff. I can be animated. I like to get people thinking. I have a lot of the anthropologist in me."

Chesley has a very Zen-like attitude about his vocation. He says he can paint at home as easily as he can paint at the studio. He comes to the studio if he feels like it. And he still doesn't wear a watch. "I just be," he says. "I get away from the insanity of the world and get into this animal mode. Animals exist day to day in that rhythm of nature. I try to go there."

Sumter County Gallery of Art Curator, Cole Miller notes a philosophical connection between Chesley and the early American landscape painter Thomas Cole. Speaking directly to Cole in 1829, the poet William Cullen Bryant declared in a sonnet;

*Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest—fair,*

*But different—every where the trace of men,*

*Paths, homes, graves, ruins...*

*Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight,*

*But keep that earlier, wilder image bright.*

In words that echo the sentiments of Stephen Chesley, Thomas Cole, writing in 1836 lamented the senseless squandering of the natural world. In the flagrant face of the new American motto for westward expansion, 'Manifest Destiny', Cole noted "that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly

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It was during this time that Chesley's paintings began attracting the attention of the local, regional and national art world. Recognized in 1981 by the Columbia Museum of Art as an emerging talent he went on to win a top 100 in the first National Parks competition of 1987, exhibiting at the Smithsonian, and in 1996 a National Endowment for the Arts, Southeast Regional Fellowship, Southeast Center for Contemporary Art.

Chesley has continued his work, which he characterizes as poetic realism, along with welded and carved sculptural pieces in addition to book illustration including W.S. Merwin's poem "Palm" for the Thomas Cooper Society. Chesley is a fierce conservationist and naturalist. He continues his creative journey at the new Stormwater Studios in Columbia, SC.

In 2011 Chesley sat down with *Undefined Magazine's* Kristine Hartvigsen for a rare, in-depth interview: "While Chesley supports himself with his art, his investments sustain him through the economic peaks and valleys of the sometimes fickle art market. But on the whole, Chesley's livelihood is a byproduct of his lifestyle".

"I paint for myself," he says from a relaxed spot in his studio. "I do it regardless of whether it sells. It makes no difference to me." That's not to say he isn't pleased if someone purchases a piece because of the sheer joy it elicits or because it moves them to introspection. But Chesley understands the different motivations that drive sales in a