

Artist Eric Aho: Saxtons River painter earns Governor's Award

By Mary Gow, November 16, 2016



Photos by Rachel Portesi Saxtons River painter Eric Aho in his studio with his France paintings

In the Finnish tradition of sauna, a plunge into cold water follows the steamy experience of the sauna chamber. In winter, an avanto, a hole cut through the ice of a lake or pond close by the sauna, provides that bracing access.

Eric Aho's paintings in his "Ice Cuts" series immerse viewers in the experience of the avanto. In each large canvas, the trapezoidal plunge pool is center stage, framed by the vertically cut surface ice. Seen from an elevated viewpoint, with no horizon or figures or structures, the avanto seems to surround the viewer, inviting reflection and connecting to further depths.

Aho, who lives in Saxtons River, will be the recipient of the 2016 Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. The award is the highest honor presented to an artist by the state of Vermont. Aho's paintings have been widely exhibited nationally and internationally

and are in collections of major institutions including New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Governor's Arts Awards celebration will be held on Tuesday, Nov. 15 at the Putney School in Putney.

In paintings, including those in the "Ice Cuts" series, Aho brings together landscape and abstraction. His paintings connect viewers to the experience of landscapes rather than representations of them. From his minimalist plunge pools to turbulent snowy mountains to an ongoing series inspired by locales in France, places where his father's army company passed and engaged just after D-Day, Aho's paintings evoke the natural landscape and launch deeper exploration.

"I couldn't be making these imaginative leaps of paintings about the landscape if I wasn't living here," said Aho, who has lived in Vermont for most of the last three decades. "I am not making paintings of Vermont but about the landscape, with landscape a springboard," said Aho. "There's an exchange between local and universal. There's a saying, think globally and act locally. This is think locally and act globally."

Born in Massachusetts, Aho grew up in rural New Hampshire. His family combined deep New England and Scandinavian roots – his father's side came from Finland.

Always drawn to art, Aho graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art in 1988, focusing on printmaking and drawing. His formal education included advanced studies at the School of Art and Design in London and at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana. Awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, he studied and painted in Finland and western Russia.

Aho's shift to painting began when he started teaching at the Putney School in the late 1980s. To teach painting to his students, he needed to learn more himself.

"A lot of the methods I developed and shared with my students remain with me today, especially regarding initial response and clarity of purpose," said Aho. "As a young teacher at a boarding school your personal time is severely limited. I found myself with about an hour a day to work, so I had to work quickly and be very focused. When you step out in a landscape there are a million things to consider. I learned to decide quickly and not second guess my response."

His paintings started small. Soon he became increasingly involved in painting landscapes.

"Figures occupied the landscapes first, then figures and land, and then just landscape," said Aho. "I always felt that a painting I was making of the landscape was more than a picture of a place – it was about a deeper experience."

Many of Aho's early paintings are grounded in New England vistas. Aho also turned inward on the landscape with a series of paintings of the Proctor quarries.

Aho's "Ice Cuts" paintings were exhibited at the Hood Museum of Art in Hanover earlier this year. His subject – the avanto – connects to his Finnish roots, his times in Finland, his father's memory of cutting ice in the 1930s, Aho's own avanto, and more.

"I found this hole in the ice as a subject that could hold these ideas of history, biography, time – about both the object and the ideas that surround the object, a catalyst for reflection," said Aho.

Goals and imagination and the quest to reach the inaccessible are all implied in Aho's mountain paintings. These are not specific, recognizable summits, but lofty peaks, forces of nature.

"What I try to do is not paint what I've seen, but what I've felt physically, the shock of a space. You have that feeling when you're at the top of Camel's Hump, that response to something bigger than us," said Aho.

Aho has another continuing project that deals with his father's experience in World War II, when as a combat engineer he went through Europe from Normandy to the Czech border. His father didn't talk about those times. Recently, though, military records of his company's path have been released. Aho has started visiting these sites. His paintings grow out of glimpses and memory.

Governor's Arts Awards

The Vermont Arts Council, in association with the Governor's office, will honor the recipients of the 2016 Governor's Arts Awards at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 15, in the Michael S. Currier Center at The Putney School. For tickets or information, go online to www.vermontartscouncil.org.