

Material evidence of a life in process

By **ARLENE LASKEY** Brantford Expositor March 17, 2011



Sixty works created over several decades by Paris artist John Mars are drawing crowds to the Woodstock Art Gallery, 447 Hunter St. On view until April 2, curator **Maria Ricker's** impressive installation includes many paintings as well as collages, mixed media and three-dimensional works. These reveal the breadth and depth of the artist's creative process and provide irrefutable material evidence of his commitment to excellence.

Just inside the gallery door is his first painting. The 1971 oil-on-panel suggests what is to come - a series of distinctly personal acts of art. In the large lower gallery several paintings keep company with the artist's droll construction "Special reward for Man Ray" and the tongue-in-cheek Dadaesque 'ready-made' "In Lieu of Flowers"-a couple of Mason jars filled with used paintbrushes on a sculpture stand. These lighthearted works attest to Mars' whimsical side while his oil paintings reflect the intense focus and discipline underlying his practice.

"Holland, Michigan" (1980, 48 x 58 inches) pulses with quiet authority. Its surface is rich and luscious, inviting contemplation. Underlying passages of subtle colour are suggestive of the gold-greens and ochres of autumn fields. Onto these are laid the numerous darker heavily-textured vertical elements which cluster along the top of the panel as if ready to advance downward.

Its complement, "Natural Painting," hangs opposite. Together they anchor the room in counterpoint to the more vividly active, heavily-textured, bold-coloured recent works which shout for attention on the side walls.

"These are intense abstract paintings," says **Bryce Kanbara**, who attended the opening, "and you don't see that often today." Artist, curator and proprietor of Hamilton's you me gallery, www.youmegallery.ca, Kanbara finds them "interesting as objects in and of themselves, not just as illusions. You are drawn to the surfaces from a distance and they reward you up close because they are so tactile."

Developed layer by layer over several years, paintings like these need to be seen in person. Their complex and detailed surfaces cannot possibly

be captured in a photo and the smell of the oils lingers long after each is deemed finished.

Upstairs, two large gallery spaces suggest the scope of Mars' explorations in paint, while a third features intriguing collages, mixed-media works and his endlessly fascinating "Accumulations".

Several tall plexiglass containers are filled with layer upon colourful layer of what the artist calls "detritus" -the pieces that are left when something breaks, falls apart, or is destroyed.

Curator **Ricker**, like many viewers, finds these works powerfully affecting.

Mars' works "bypass the brain and go straight to the heart," she says, evoking a "constant sense of wonder". Honoured rather than discarded, the bits and pieces suggest the myriad "little" things too often overlooked -- the transitory markers of lives lived.

No one creates in a vacuum, least of all John Mars. Mentorship and a sense of connection are central to his way of being. He values the influence of artists he's known personally or through intense research in books, galleries and museums.

Chief among heroes is Clyfford Still. As a boy, he discovered Still's arresting abstract compositions while leafing through one of his mother's books. The power of the art, even in black-and-white reproductions, inspired a journey of discovery which continues today.

At Buffalo's Albright Knox Gallery, www.albrightknox.org,

Mars found what art historian Thomas Hoving calls "the most thumping modern and contemporary collections in the world". With over thirty Stills, including the massive and heart stopping "1957-D, No. 1" whose great swaths of black and yellow burn themselves into memory, the gallery quickly became a favourite destination.

When Denver's new Clyfford Still Museum opens later this year, its 825 paintings, 1,575 works on paper, letters, sketchbooks, manuscripts, photo albums and personal effects may draw Mars further south (www.clyffordstillmuseum.org). Meanwhile, he'll drive to Museum London as often as possible before the April 3 closing of the exhibit which features another of his heroes, Canada's pioneering abstractionist Bertram Brooker. John Mars continues to store up experience, filling the massively detailed memory banks essential to his disciplined life in process. Woodstock Art Gallery's exhibition celebrates the impressive accomplishments of one of our own.

