

Nashville Arts

MAGAZINE

Paul Lancaster- March 2010 by Lizzie Peters | photography by Anthony Scarlati



Paul Lancaster lives in his own world, though I am fairly certain that creativity has him on speed dial. Just a few hours with this shy and gentle man are enough to let you know you are in the presence of someone very special, someone unique. Years before James Cameron ever conceived his groundbreaking film *Avatar*, Lancaster had already created a vast body of work that could have been used to storyboard the film.



Considered a visionary painter, he is much too shy to be called a mystic—that would imply he shares his visions with others verbally. However, inside his head lives a gentle world filled with finely detailed imagery and vivid palettes of color. Very privately, Lancaster breathes life into the many forests, faeries, angels and women he sees in his mind. Regardless of media, his work celebrates and articulates the magnificence of creation itself and the lush beauty of the feminine. There are very few men in his work.

Lancaster seems slightly frightened and exposed standing in the halls of Lyzon Gallery. He is clearly uncomfortable in the presence of the photographer and other people who surround him. Though he is almost skittish when spoken to, there is nothing artificial about this man. Wisps of days long past and hidden mystery dance across his eyes when he is asked to recall or comment on some aspect of his past or present work.

If there is one universal theme running through all of Lancaster's work, it is the extraordinary connection to the energy of life. He took the time to show me some of the paintings and etchings he has created over the past fifty years. The gallery itself, long an important and integral piece of Nashville's art scene, is frozen in time. Lyzon Gallery harkens back to a period when art was a simple affair between lovers—those who passionately create art and those who passionately seek to possess the unique creations of the artists. It is because of Lancaster's long association with the gallery that his work was eventually discovered beyond the intimate walls of security within his head.



However, his incredible ability to use the graduations of color creates worlds within worlds in each piece. Exquisite detail and repetitive themes within every image are both fascinating and deliberate, almost as if some unseen pattern maker has used Lancaster's brush as a marionette.



As a young boy raised in the poverty-stricken rural areas of Tennessee, Lancaster loved to explore the woods, enjoying the solitude and silence. He enjoyed carving small objects of wood with little designs. Filled with a strong desire to learn how to paint and draw, he hungered for the ability to translate the beautiful visions in his head to something tangible in the real world. “I went to a small school. It had a stage with a backdrop for one of the plays. I liked the backdrop and wondered how they did it, how it was created.”

But like lots of children during the Great Depression, Lancaster dropped out of school at age sixteen and went to work for the H. G. Hill grocery stores to assist the family. Asked by his employer to paint and letter signs, he would often embellish them with his own designs. Timidly, he was beginning to expose his inner artistry and his uncommon portrayal of common things.



Lancaster experienced his first major exposure to a museum and several art galleries during a stint in the army. “I loved it all but was afraid I could never be as good as they were. I was very intimidated; it made me doubt my ability to paint,” he observes. After viewing some of his figurative sketches, his superiors recommended he reenlist and become a medical illustrator. Somewhat homesick, the artist returned to Tennessee and his family.

As we climb the steep, metal steps to a small, unheated space above the gallery, Lancaster is apologetic about the jumble of things stacked around the tiny room. It is evident the space holds many memories and pieces of his life, as he used it as a studio for many years.

“I have the hardest time talking to people. I know I should talk, but I don’t know what to say.” Fortunately for us, his art speaks volumes. It is obvious each piece of this man’s amazing collection contains a distinct ethereal quality. He discusses his evolution from glass plates to plastic sheets used in printing and the process of creating detail with drills and slowly explains the workings of the dusty press that created many of his incredible etchings.



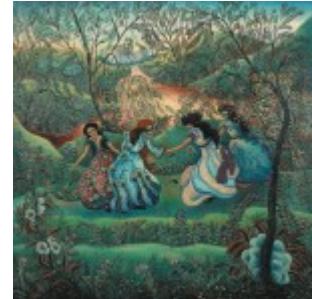
Lancaster retired in the mid 1990s to devote himself wholly to the artistic worlds within his head. He does not take photographs or sketch out a piece, but relies strictly on his inner world. Time slips away easily. He spends countless hours creating his art and cannot tell you how long a piece takes to create. Nor was he methodical about numbering earlier work. Other pursuits are few. “I’m not much interested in ballgames,” he says. “I watch a little TV, but mostly I paint.”

Perhaps due to his reclusive nature, each piece exudes serenity. It is hard to comprehend Lancaster’s ability to capture such intricate design, or how each piece within a piece connects symbiotically like some giant, magical puzzle. So precise and detailed, the vivid colors and patterns resonate with the secrets of mankind and the beautiful habitat that is Mother Earth. Some works are reminiscent of Haitian or Polynesian folk art.

Self taught, Lancaster admits to feeling safe when locked into his visions. “I don’t think much about it. I just sit for a while, and then I begin to see what I need to create. Sometimes I can get sort of restless, but when I’m doing art everything else goes away. The one place I’m happy is in my head; it’s my special space.” The

visions are self-guided, as Lancaster never has an idea how they will progress on the canvas. “They just come. I start up in the left-hand corner and then just move across,” he says in a completely humble manner.

“I prefer brighter colors today. I love making different blues and greens; they just tell me when they are right. When I look at them I don’t know how I created a shade. My painting was a little dark way back, but it might have been that I wasn’t too sure of myself,” he says.



Lancaster is totally unconcerned about landing in important collections of institutions or individual collectors. Yet his work has been featured in major exhibitions at the American Visionary Art Museum, Art Chicago, the New York Outsider Fair, and other venues in Washington DC, Pittsburgh, and New York. Closer to home, Lancaster’s painting was included in a major exhibition at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts titled *Art of Tennessee*.



“People often don’t seem to understand what I’m doing. It used to bother me, but I never had any negative feelings about it,” he says. Even though Paul Lancaster lives in his own world, fortunately for all of us he is a local treasure.

**Our sincere thanks to Lyzon Gallery for their assistance
with this article.**

Paul Lancaster is represented by Greyart.com.

