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Look closer: Human figures, in a new way at An Beal Bocht

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Matthew McDonnell talks about his painting process, which often involves different types of paper and ink. His work is on display at An Beal Bocht Cafe throughout March.

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By TIFFANY MOUSTAKAS

No matter how many times someone looks at Matthew McDonnell's work, it never looks the same.

A quick trip to An Beal Bocht Café this month proves just that. One minute, you could be looking at human legs stretching out across from each other, but then on second glance, they look like they're walking instead.

That's because McDonnell's abstract work focuses on the human figure using elements of surrealism and cubism.

McDonnell has been fascinated with the human form since he started painting in the 1980s, inspired by how “magical and surreal” bodies can look.

“When you go through and see what you can do with posture and pose, and how a posture and pose can provide an expression, or (how) you can get a sense of anxiety or ease from just a pose, you don’t even need the head,” McDonnell said. “It’s fascinating.”



Matthew McDonnell often sketches his work first before putting ink on paper.

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McDonnell describes his work as similar to klecksography, the art of making images from inkblots. But McDonnell’s work isn’t just dropping spots of ink onto a paper and calling it a day.

The process actually takes a few days. McDonnell typically sketches a piece out first, then uses different types of paper, sumi ink — found within the soot of pine branches in Japan — and acrylic paint. Instead of matching exactly what he initially sketches, McDonnell said he likes to let the work guide him.

“Once I start on the finished (product) on the paper, I don’t want to stop or correct,” he said. “So you kind of go with the flow of the ink. It’s almost like a little private performance in that you try to just say, ‘Let’s go with it.’”

When he isn’t working on his art, McDonnell is a full-time architect. Although he separates his day job from his other work, painting over the last three decades has taught him to trust the art and keep at it.



One of Matthew McDonnell’s biggest influences is painter Paul Klee, a Swiss German artist who worked in cubist, expressionist and surrealist modes.

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“If you don’t fight the medium, the medium will always reward you,” McDonnell said. “Inspiration really comes through hard work and through repetitive work. So the more you do, the more you will evolve and change. It’s just natural.”

At the opening reception for McDonnell’s month-long display at An Beal earlier this month, McDonnell was able to interact with customers and answer questions.



Matthew McDonnell had his first exhibition at An Beal Bocht Cafe in 2012.

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“They could see that they were figures, but they wanted to see what the story was behind this or that depiction,” McDonnell said. “The interaction with the patrons added a lot to it.”

And for anyone who has or plans to see his work at the 445 W. 238th St. eatery, McDonnell wants them to see how established art forms are still relevant today.

“I hope that they learn that the art of the (human) figure isn’t dead and it hasn’t stopped the tradition of surrealism and the form of cubism,” he said. “It still has a life.”