

## 'Return to Appleton' first-time exhibit for Florimbi

By Kristen Costanza

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APPLETON (Jan 22): Appleton resident Steve Florimbi isn't interested in making "difficult" paintings. He wants to take the mystery out of art. One of his hopes, when people view his paintings, is that his paintings will make people smile.

Florimbi chose [Hannibal's Café](#) as the place to exhibit "Return to Appleton," a collection of oil pastel paintings completed within the past year. The paintings will be on display at the café on the Common in Union through Feb. 25.



Steve Florimbi stands next to "Blue Spruce," one of his paintings on display at Hannibal's Cafe in Union. (Photos by Kristen Costanza)

Florimbi has lived many places and done many things in his life. Right now, he's working at Cannell Boatbuilding in Camden.

"I've been a boatbuilder and woodworker for about 12 years," said Florimbi.

Florimbi was born in Pennsylvania and lived there for a few years before his family moved to Madrid when he was six. He and his family spent five years in Spain, and returned to the United States to live in Massachusetts, and then New Jersey.

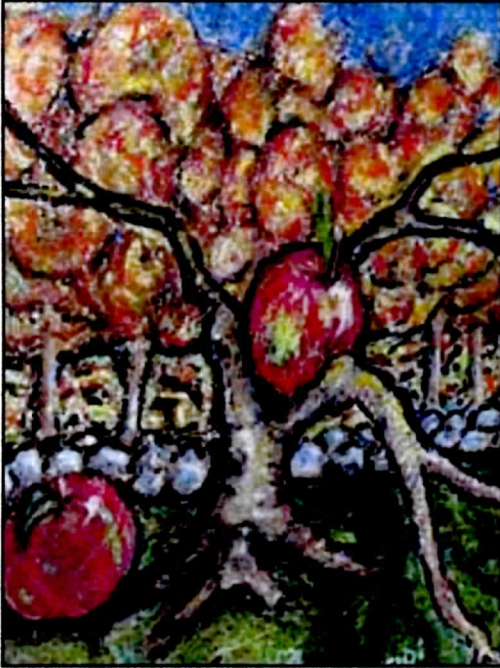
He attended Worcester Polytechnic Institute, starting off as an engineering major, but then went to University of New Hampshire for environmental science, and ended up graduating with a degree in resource economics.

"I wanted to change my major to art," said Florimbi, "but oddly enough, my brother talked me out of it. He's an artist. He said that once you're an artist, you're always an artist, and I should try to learn another skill."

"I didn't change my major, and basically I was miserable the entire time while I was in college. I hated it, except for my art experience," said Florimbi.

He took an art course every semester, working in pastels, oil paints and doing sculpture. Florimbi also worked as a carpenter in the summer while he was attending University of New Hampshire. He built timber frame homes.

"Somehow I got it into my head that I wanted to build a boat," said Florimbi.



It took him a month to construct a skiff. In 1989, Florimbi started looking around at boatbuilding schools and found what he was looking for at the Rockport Apprentice Shop (now Atlantic Challenge in Rockland).

"I intended only going for six weeks, and I ended up staying two years," said Florimbi.

After finishing school, Florimbi went on to work at Cannell Boatbuilding and doing art sporadically.

The story behind the show's title -- "Return to Appleton" -- takes Florimbi out to the West Coast and back, along with his partner, Sarah Price, and their dog and two cats.

Florimbi and Price owned a home and property in Appleton since 1990. Two years ago they sold their home, while retaining three acres of the land, and moved to California to be closer to Florimbi's family. They stayed only a year.

"Apple Tree," oil pastel, by Steve Florimbi.

"It was hard, financially and emotionally," said Florimbi. "The whole experience made me reevaluate what my priorities were, what was important. When we came back, I started right into painting."

They had a 10x16 cottage built on the three acres of land in Appleton they had retained.

"We'll stay there until we build our 'house' house," said Florimbi.

Florimbi had worked with acrylics for a while, but he likes using oil pastels most of all, and considers them a great match for his style. "Return to Appleton" is done in oil pastel and oleopasto.

As Florimbi painted this past year, he amassed more and more pieces of artwork. He wondered

what to do with them.

"I approached Mark Hannibal around September or October of last year. We come here a lot and a lot of neat people show their work here. He was really receptive to the idea," said Florimbi.

All of the paintings in Florimbi's showing have been painted since he and Price returned from California. The work is friendly, sometimes humorous or bittersweet. His style could even be considered...European?

"Madrid influenced me, absolutely," said Florimbi. "We went to museums practically every weekend when I was a kid, and traveled to Italy a lot. Even now, I'll see a painting in a book and I'll recognize it, because I've seen it."



From left, "The Ridge" and "Cherubim," oil pastel, by Steve Florimbi.

"I'm not very good at art history -- not very good at talking about it -- but I know it. I've had a lot of exposure to it," said Florimbi.

Florimbi sees his paintings as being illustrative, with a twist of humor or a story behind them. Nature scenes predominate in Florimbi's work, and there are also quite a few paintings which feature a dog.

"My dog is 14 1/2 years old. Part of the reason I paint him is to deal with his imminent mortality. He's been a big part of my life," said Florimbi.

Painting from memory, Florimbi brings imagery from his subconscious and applies them to the canvas. Sometimes he begins a painting by almost doodling, and the painting fully resolves itself. Other times, he thinks about his paintings when he closes his eyes for sleep at night.

He doesn't think about painting while he's working on boats, however.

"Boatbuilding is an entire different process. It's fine joinery, a lot of interior raised panel bulkheads and deck joinery," said Florimbi. "Both painting and boatbuilding take a lot of concentration. But my painting is letting myself go while concentrating, meditative. Boatbuilding is very precise."

Florimbi works on boats full time, and paints at nights and on weekends. He enjoys having nights alone to work, although he said he prefers to work during the day because of the light. While he works, he listens to an eclectic collection of music, from jazz to hard rock to electronic, at a very loud volume.

Florimbi himself is a multi-faceted individual, with wide-ranging tastes and perspectives from the many things he has done and places he has lived. His artwork allows others to bring their experience to his work.

"I want my paintings to be light, easily understood, not a big mystery," said Florimbi. "A lot of people come to art with feelings that they should be able to evaluate it, to judge art whether it's good or not. I want to break that barrier."

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