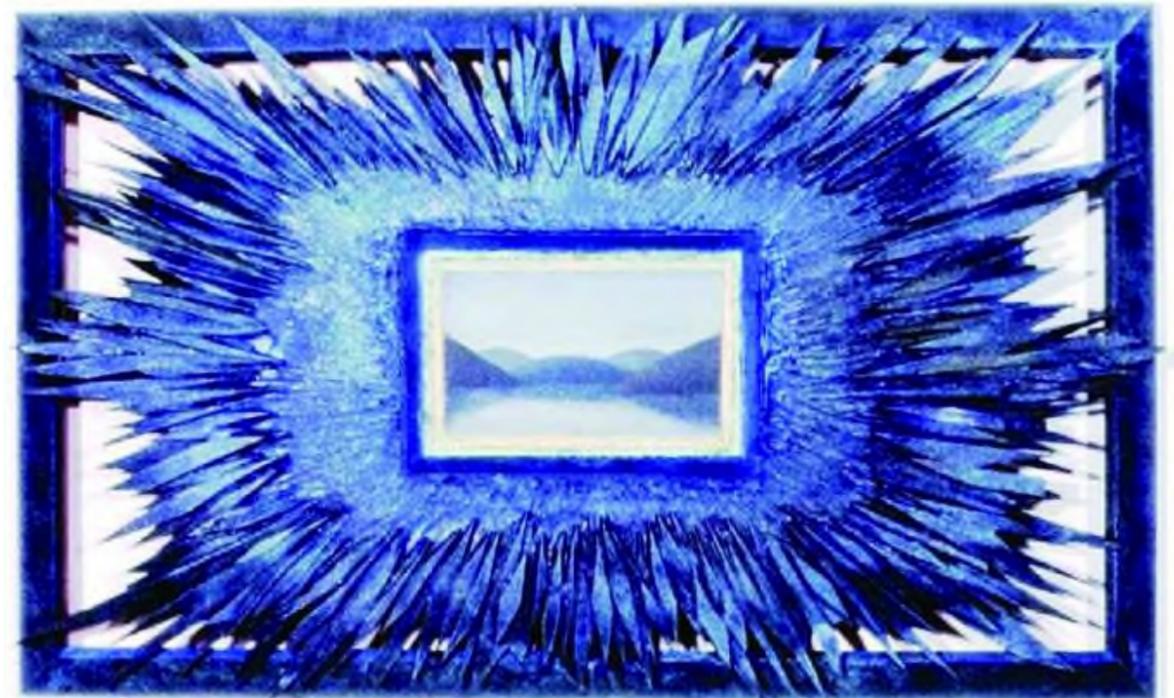


JOURNEY NORTH



Moving from the edge and energy of Los Angeles to the placid North forced artist **Rufus Snoddy** to look deep inside and adjust his bearings.

TEXT BY PATTY LANOUE STEARNS PORTRAIT BY TODD ZAWISTOWSKI

t's a frigid pre-spring day and Rufus Snoddy's studio in the lower level of his Williamsburg home is nearly dark, save for a slice of gray light that filters in from the window. Half an hour ago, the power went out. And just a few minutes ago, Snoddy's daughter, Maya, called from school with a sore throat, wanting him to come and get her.

"I'll be right back—it's only five minutes away," says the soft-spoken artist, laughing but obviously rattled, offering a steaming cup of coffee from a thermal carafe. "Just wait here until I get back."

Near the window, two wooden easels hold canvases, one covered in sculptured wood that's painted a matte charcoal; the other, a 4-by-5-foot canvas layered in acrylic circles that look like cells, and underneath, a large running figure whose middle is a rectangle of sinuous wood painted red, white and blue. A sliver of a moon rises next to the figure, and above that, a circle is cut clean from the canvas.

Alone in this artist's studio, the primal vibes from these sculpted forms, the organic ripples of their textured surfaces, the glare of the piercing eyeballs and cryptic words that punctuate the works are all palpable. They boldly resonate, sometimes shout, imploring you to imagine their messages.

The brushes, knives, spatulas and containers of Nova Gel acrylic and oil paint that Snoddy uses are stacked on a worktable. A wooden stool is spattered with feisty hues, and two high-intensity lamps stand ready to illuminate the works, as soon as the power comes back.

Not long after Snoddy returns with his ailing 9-year-old, the electricity pulses, and the lights spark on, revealing an entire gallery of creations that circle the room and generate voltage unlike any seen or felt in Northern Michigan.

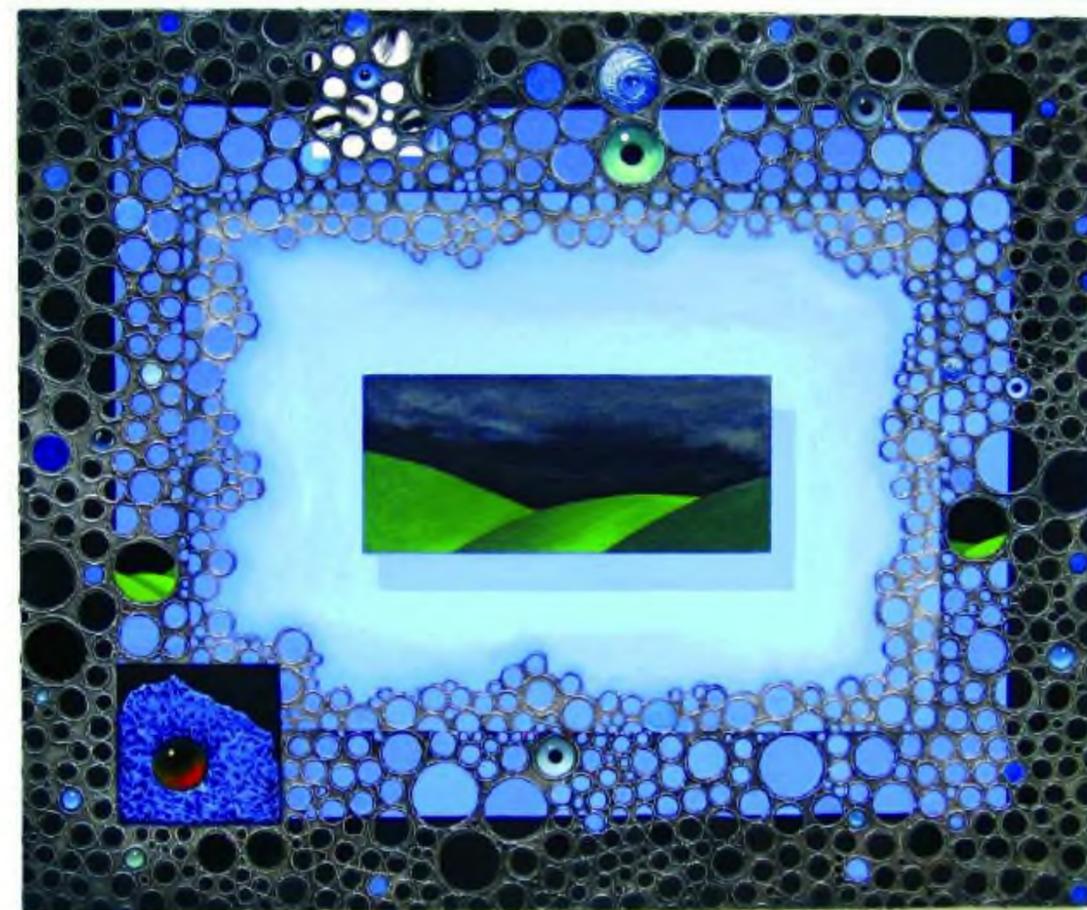
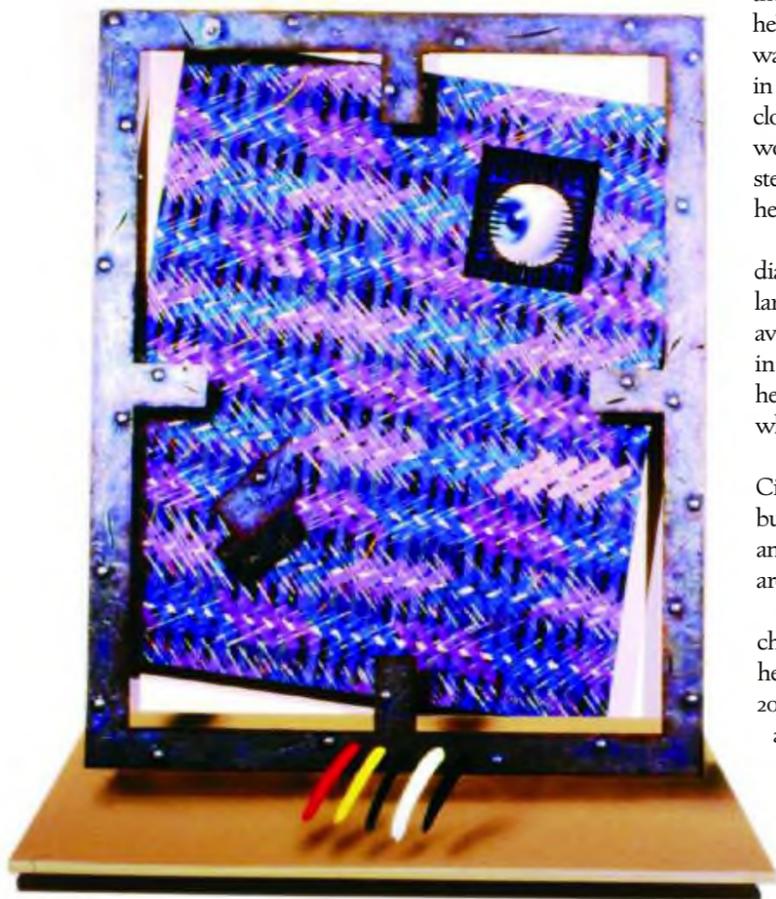
WHEN RUFUS SNODDY ARRIVED IN TRAVERSE CITY IN 2002,

the green vistas and gentle pace were diametric opposites of the life he'd lived in Los Angeles. After the horror of 9/11, the tranquility was a welcome change. He and his wife, Robynn James, had lived in Santa Fe for a time, and then moved to Northern Michigan to be close to her parents, who were in poor health. Snoddy figured he would continue his artwork, get into a few galleries, and contribute steadily to the family pot by doing interior and exterior murals like he did in L.A.

For this eloquent big-city artist, however, the North was immediate culture shock. He'd spent more than 30 years creating edgy, large-scale constructions that enlivened dozens of group exhibits in avant-garde galleries around the country. He starred in solo shows in New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Fe and Paris. Yet when he met with some of the local gallery owners, they didn't know what to make of his abstract art.

As Marcia Bellinger of Belstone Gallery in downtown Traverse City recalls, "When I first saw his work I was certainly impressed, but I didn't know where to send him. His pieces were really big and kind of out of my realm. It's so different from anything we see around here, yet it's certainly spectacular work."

Bellinger took some of his smaller pieces, but told him to check out the fine-art co-op on Eighth Street, Gallery 544, where he was enthusiastically embraced. He settled there until it closed in 2003. "When I met him and we viewed his work, I was just in awe," painter Nancy Stuck, one of the gallery members, recalls. "He brought a new eye to the art scene that we hadn't seen in Northern Michigan. His skill in using medium and his ability to incorporate found objects into his work is to be admired,



and he has the true sensibility of an artist—he is driven to create."

Bellinger calls Snoddy, who earned a B.A. in design and an M.F.A. from California State University at Los Angeles, an artist's artist. "He does what he does—it's urban and uptown." She gave him a show at Belstone after 544 closed that also featured another abstract artist, Cadillac sculptor David Petrakovitz. She remembers the positive feedback the show brought. "People said, thank you for giving us the opportunity to see such outstanding work that we don't get to see here. You've taken your gallery to a new level."

After moving his work into the Evans Forney Fine Art Gallery on Front Street, which folded after a little more than a year, a frustrated but determined Snoddy and his wife opened a small gallery in Williamsburg called Diaspora in 2005.

WITH HIS DAUGHTER tucked into her bed, Snoddy is back in his studio, in front of the vibrant collage with the running figure and the moon. Sturdy and well-built, the artist's easy laughter and gentle manner are counterpoints to what's brimming underneath. He points to the figure: "That's

me—visceral. Being out on a limb. That whole feeling of being insecure and raw and my insides exposed and all that kind of stuff."

It has been a rocky several years for Snoddy, who will turn 60 in July. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer two years after he moved to Northern Michigan. He was treated successfully at the University of Michigan Hospital in 2004 and has regained his energy. He and Robynn closed their Diaspora Gallery when she took a new job, and they moved to East Lansing. Their house went on the market and didn't sell for months, and then the new job didn't work out.

They returned to Williamsburg, his wife eventually found another job, and Snoddy has done a mural or two, taught some art classes, worked in a friend's casting foundry and continued making his art. But with tough economic times in Michigan and a relatively small market with loads of artists and few who can make a living at it full-time, Snoddy's hurdles have been many. Robynn, who grew up in the area, acknowledges the ups and downs have tested their marriage. "It's very hard to keep up the artistic and aesthetic issues when there are economic issues looming every day. We know we are like so many people up here who are just trying to

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Cold Bay*, 1996, acrylic on canvas and wood, 44×28×4 inches. **ABOVE:** *Landscape Blue*, 2006, acrylic on canvas with collage, 36×30 inches. **OPPOSITE:** *A Captive's Audience*, 1991, acrylic and mixed media, 60×56×6 inches.

live in a place they love. We want it to work but it's tough trying to keep body and soul together."

Snoddy loves the surroundings, the lakes, the changing of the seasons, the textures. "My work has always been about texture. There's a huge well of textures to pull from. So that's had a really profound effect on me."

As an African-American artist in these parts, Snoddy has felt the sting of racism, something he left behind early in life, in East Texas, before his family moved to Los Angeles. Snoddy, the 10TH of 12 siblings, was 11 years old when his father was run out of town by his employer, who accused him of organizing for the NAACP. But Snoddy does not define himself as a black man, just a man, and spent 15 years living in an all-white commune in West L.A. "with a bunch of millionaires who were into sailing and traveling around the world," he says. "It was not my life, it was more about stuff. I'm human—more interested in the human condition."



Where to see Rufus Snoddy's art

Gallery Fifty's newly expanded space will host Snoddy's art from June 2 through 30 with a virtual exhibition on www.galleryfifty.com. Gallery Fifty is at 800 Cottageview Drive, Suite 50—adjacent to Trattoria Stella—in the Village at Grand Traverse Commons, Traverse City (231-932-0775). Michigan Artist Gallery in Suttons Bay (231-271-4922) also carries his work. Snoddy's Web site is www.rufussnoddy.com.

—P.L.S.

Until his Michigan transition, Snoddy's creativity has always been fueled by California's urban angst, energy, ethnic diversity and his collaboration with other artists. He finds himself far more introspective, which is the subject of the series, "Innerspaces," he's created since moving to and from East Lansing. "It's more talking about what's going on inside of me—inner impulses, the inner changes. The juxtaposition of me being here as opposed to being there."

The artist doesn't necessarily see the adjustment as negative, but it's definitely challenging. "I still have that kind of edgy desire in terms of my work, and I want to do edgy things, but you look around and everybody's doing really kind of sedate stuff. Even people who've got their toes kind of out of the circle, their work is a little bit tame. It's kind of a social pressure, day to day, to conform to that. Kind of like, tone it down. Mellow out a little bit."

BUT EVEN AT HIS MOST SOUL-SEARCHING, Snoddy's edges are honed and powerful. There's no convention in his work. Like his "landscape" called "Night Sky," painted brilliant shades of green, a swatch of rolling turf with a moody sky, circles cut out of thick paint, all of it housed in an ornate rococo frame. "I'm doing landscape but not landscape painting—more of a caricature than a real place, or more like a collage," the artist explains. His art is heavily influenced by Native Americans and indigenous peoples of the South Sea, whose aesthetics come from the rituals of day-to-day life. "That's my sensibility, collecting things in my environment—experiences, materials—and trying to put all of those into a piece, an object."

One current work, for example, features a small Italian painting that he got off a spaghetti box, a picture of a wolf, which relates to the Northern hunting and wildlife scene, and there's also a drawing his daughter Maya did at age 2.

Other pieces are layered with circuit boards, transparencies, paper bags, circles of paint that have been cut out of other paintings, photographs of his studio in L.A., pieces of paintings that other artists threw away, and, of course, those eyeballs, which symbolize this artist's ever-critical voice.

"I make my stuff. I make objects. I see painting as object. I see these rectangular canvases as objects. It's hard for me to just do an image on a surface, because I'm about making stuff, bringing an object into existence. In an objective way rather than a pictorial, window way, looking out at something. I don't see it as necessarily the kind of rectangle, square thing where you put a frame around it

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and stick it on the wall."

Snoddy reflects on that convention—the rectangle on the wall: "My work started from a place of being not interested in that. I find myself gradually moving back to that just because of the pressure of the area, just to get people interested in what I'm doing. The work I brought from California, people look at it and they say, ah, it's really cool, but it's not ..." he pauses, and sighs. "I need to sell work, and I hate doing that. I don't like making art for commerce. But you have to live, so I find even to my distaste that I'm working in a more conventional way."

Former Gallery 544 member Jerry Gates understands Snoddy's dilemma well. The prolific local painter calls it "the sound of one hand clapping," working alone without feedback in a highly competitive market, walking the line between pushing the creative envelope while needing to put food on the table. But Gates sees all that changing as more sophisticated galleries open Up North. So does noted Traverse City painter Joe De Luca: "Abstract art has been very difficult for the community to grasp. We hope that maybe Rufus can bridge the gap with his beautiful abstract work."

STANDING AMID THE PIECES in progress around his studio, Rufus Snoddy is animated and upbeat. He recounts the artistic discussions that Diaspora opened up and the evolution of a number of galleries in the area whose collections now include more abstract works. "I see a lot of people starting to push and go outside of the convention," he says, his green eyes beginning to sparkle.



Snoddy stops to think about all of his artistic possibilities on the horizon, among them murals for Building 50, a show at the Dennon Museum, the windows he bid on redoing at the Old Town Playhouse, his show in June, which will display mostly new work, and the huge sculptured piece that's not in the studio but will be featured in the show. He made it with limbs that fell from a tree on nearby Deal Road. "I'm excited about it—it has a lot to do with the sensibilities of this area."

Perhaps Rufus Snoddy's Michigan transition is complete. He is not only making an impact on the regional art scene, he is making art that reflects his new surroundings. Of this he is certain: "I feel like I have a story to tell, and the best way is through visual art." Even in the deep woods of Michigan. "There's unlimited potential for creativity—nobody can control my urges for creativity." ■

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OPPOSITE: *Homage to the Critical Eyes* (five strokes and a quick getaway), 1988, acrylic on canvas on wood panel, 69×60×3 inches. **ABOVE:** *Back There*, 2000, acrylic on canvas and wood panel, 56-inch circle.