



MICHAEL RAAUM EXPLORES WHAT IS POSSIBLE

By Ashlee Fairey

Artist Michael Raam has lived in the valley so long, it's impossible for him to separate his surroundings from his work. For more than 20 years, from the sanctuary of his Basalt home/studio, Raam has been translating the natural forms, vibrant colors and pulsating energy of Aspen/Snowmass into abstract paintings.

Every day, Raam takes a walk down by the Frying Pan River. It has become so familiar to him, he instinctually knows at what bend the trout are waiting. This daily routine has greatly influenced his work, giving shapes an "aquatic, floating quality," Raam explained. The peaks and valleys and rock stratification inspire patterns, and the intense red of the mountain tints his own palette.

If people were to infer one thing from his work, Raam said he guessed it would be that he's "a person who likes fun."

Raam describes his art as "colorful compositions (that) contain organic forms and strong linear elements," all the while emphasizing an underlying current of movement and energy. His paintings, typically acrylic on canvas, toy with the contrast between lively markings and solid backgrounds. He works in an abstract style because he is attracted to "the freedom of choice," Raam said. "I am interested in what's possible."

He employs vertical drips and a re-occurring spiral pattern to lead the viewer's eye in multiple directions. The drips speak to the force of gravity and allow "the real

world to enter the abstract world," Raam reasoned. "It's almost like having waterfalls in your house."

The spirals are a more enigmatic shape, even for the artist himself. "As I kid I crammed pages with these circular shapes," he recalled.

Raam considered it "a secret language or code, like a rosetta stone." The circling movement catches the eye and pulls ones attention into the piece, acting as an access point or initial code-breaker for the work of art.

“I like to dream, paint the dream and realize the dream.”



While the artist does occasionally work small (like "Sun," 24" x 18"), some of Raam's canvases loom at 144" x 144" like his most recent work, "Cryptogram." Being on a human scale encourages people to more fully enter into the art.

Michael Raam's creative process begins with sketches, like many other artists. Raam, however, is perhaps more regimented in his habits. Every day the painter sits down to draw at least one sketch in his notebook. Raam never misses a day, "or else I go nuts," he laughed.

Raam relies on an automatic painting technique, meaning he begins without pre-conceived designs and allows impulsive inspiration to channel through him. The drawings

"vary with my mood," Raam said. The technique "gets me out of my head a bit," and taps into the subconscious. "I just know that I'm going to make some marks and that it will take me somewhere."

One sketch will sometimes lead to another, and suddenly an overarching theme will emerge that Michael Raam was not conscious of before. Very often, his paintings will be a near replica of the original drawing.

Some ideas demand a longer vetting period. Construction compositions occasionally take

up to 90 days, but the painting itself requires only one week since he often has "a clear understanding of the final product." That's not to say the work does not evolve in the process. Michael Raam welcomes "mistakes," for they lead him in a fresh direction. "I consider painting to be the master conversation" between creation and creator, he said. Sometimes, he said, it seems the canvas is "yelling fix me! I hate you!" And the artist listens and obeys. Raam produces 50 - 100 works of art a year.

"There is a certain intensity to my work," Raam revealed. "I am very interested in luminosity." His highly saturated colors are a sort of signature for Raam, which he achieves by fixing each layer of paint with glaze.

Michael Raam worked at Colorado Mountain College as a full-time art teacher and counselor from 1985 until 2001. While he loved teaching, he said his time was more precious. "It's not that you give something up, you just chase something else," he rationalized.

He's set out to pursue his long-time dream: To simply make art. "I like to dream, paint the dream and realize the dream," he said.

Michael Raam currently has work in an exhibition titled "Colorado Abstract" at the Center for Visual Arts, which runs until March 7. His next show, which started Monday, will be at Colorado Mountain College. It runs through April 30. On April 9 from 6 - 8 p.m. there will be an opening reception.

For more information about Michael Raam, visit www.michaelraam.com.

Local artist Michael Raam stands before his most recent work, "Cryptogram," which towers at 12 ft. tall. The painter actually began as a photojournalist, but when he studied abroad in Mexico, inspired by the colors and textures, he chose the canvas over the negative. Being a painter has an "addictive, sucking-in quality," Raam explained. "Film didn't have that direct quality." Michael Raam still carries his camera; it helps keep his eyes sharp, always on the lookout for patterns and intriguing color combinations.