Local Artists Make Their Mark in Paris

It is not common for Cajun artists to be given the prestigious opportunity to exhibit their work in Paris, one of the most competitive art capitals of the world. Cajun musicians have long been ambassadors of the unique culture of Southwest Louisiana throughout the world. But artists of this area have had a hard enough time showing their work locally and regionally.

When Cajun musician/artist Gari Hernandez of Carencro traveled to Paris last summer, he held in the back of his mind the idea of locating a gallery that might consider displaying his art representative of the Louisiana culture. Shortly before going abroad, Hernandez founded Amaranth Contemporary Art Gallery in Carencro so that local artists would have a new outlet for showing their work in an aesthetically pleasing setting. There are few places in the Lafayette area where local artists can show their work, short of establishing their own galleries, which for most, is financially impossible.

Located in the home of co-founder Harold Bernard, Amaranth embodies a favorite Hernandez concept. "It is for the artists who care about portraying their emotions to others in a setting that does justice to their work," Hernandez said during a recent month-long visit home.

Hernandez searched for such a place in Paris and after months of coordination between the Galerie 'Quebec' and three artists-friends at home, the exhibit became a reality in June.

The Parisian showing of the art works of Lafayette artists Elemore Morgan Jr., David Alpha, Randall Labry and Hernandez, was not financially successful. But the response was artistically satisfying, especially considering that summer is hardly the peak season for art shows in the cultural center of Paris.

"The Cajuns as a body are only beginning to be understood for their art," said Hernandez, who has lived in several major cities around the U.S., in Montreal, Canada, and for the past year in Paris.

It was a fortunate coincidence that Hernandez stumbled upon a French-speaking Canadian gallery owner who is interested in exhibiting art from areas of the world with French heritage. Hernandez has since lined up eight showings for the four artists. "Le Galerie 'Quebec' has guaranteed a summer season of exposure for the Cajun artists in the future. During opening night, Hernandez, a harpist and guitarist, displayed French Cajun music with several other Parisian musicians.

"I was so busy entertaining the guests that attended the opening that I didn't get to mingle in the crowd and conduct the business of trying to properly sell our paintings," Hernandez said.

The Cajuns' work is canvas art vastly different from anything the Parisians had been previously exposed to. Hernandez said, with the exception of Lafayette artist George Rodrigue who has often shown his Cajun art in Europe.

"The emotional content and love for the subject is vastly different from anything the French have seen," Hernandez said. The lack of competition protects the art here but it doesn't perfect the technique. The beauty about being in an art capital like Paris is that you don't need a teacher. You can go to a museum to see works by Degas instead of going to a book," Hernandez said.

Artistic work from Louisiana is often considered "exotic" but the four artists in the Parisian exhibit feel certain that their works stood up against the competition for gallery space.

"We would like to think that our works have the qualities "painting" rather than being mere products of Louisiana," David Alpha said. "The works were valued objectively. The fact that the work held up in the Parisian market was a revelation to me."

They value the content of the work beyond the strict sale of the work," said Morgan, one of several Louisiana artists who showed their paintings in Paris some three years ago. Morgan has established a reputation for his rice fields on canvases of irregular size. Labry for his Cajun barrooms and warehouses and Alpha for his unusually large tropical landscape paintings and etchings.

All four agreed that there is a sense of color and light tones common to their works that distinguishes them as Southwest Louisiana artists.

"All of us have artistically been affected by our environment," said Alpha, who spent three weeks in Paris and attended the opening of the exhibit. "It's an environment conducive to life and that's the main reason we've all stayed here to live and work. We draw upon it for creativity."

Hernandez calls the environment in Southwest Louisiana an "inspiration."

"There's an eternal quality, a primeval quality that existed long before the white man ever came here," Hernandez, more concerned with the cultural exchange involved in exposing the French to Southwest Louisiana art, admits that he may have done his small share of opening new realms abroad for Cajun artists. The possibility is now greater that artists from this area could develop an European market for their work as well as build up their individual reputations.

"The French are more interested in us than we are in ourselves," Hernandez said.

LOUISIANA ARTISTS - These four artists, all of Southwestern Louisiana, have had several of their paintings on display in Paris, France this past summer. They are (from left to right) Elemore Morgan, David Alpha, Gari Hernandez and Randall Labry. The group is holding one of Morgan's works depicting area rice fields. (Photo by Philip Gould).