St. Martinville's Dennis Paul Williams enjoys the simple life

BY NANCY REGENT
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ST. MARTINVILLE — Dennis Paul Williams lives on a main stretch of highway leading to St. Martinville. He says his home and art studio are easy to find. But his name doesn't hang from the door post at his gold-colored trailer in the middle of shotgun houses. There are no signs attracting prospective art dealers to his door.

Williams' philosophy is at the center of his paintings: Simply. Give the viewer a sense of spirituality, of belonging to a higher force.

It doesn't concern himself with material trappings. He doesn't even have a phone. He listens to classical guitar music while working in his studio.

A walk through his mother's house, in between his home and studio, is like walking through a gallery showroom. On every wall hangs a painting.

"I work in spirits," Williams said, holding a painting from the "Prophecy" series. "I try to depict the depth of, freeing oneself from the things of the world that bind us."

All of his series have biblical titles or spiritual themes: The Apparition, The Season Before Birth, The First Fall, The Imaginary Path. He works with mixed media, with most of his work created on paper, rather than canvas.

Williams begins each day on a pilgrimage before he paints. He rides his bike to church, usually the Catholic Notre Dame church, and prepares himself spiritually. He prays on his way to the studio. While painting, he works himself into a trance-like state, completely absorbing himself in his work.

He prays a long time before he signs his name to his work. He has burned work that doesn't meet his standards. He estimates that he has worked on hundreds of art pieces in his lifetime. He never wants to stop. Most of the time he is not allowed to talk about God in the galleries. So when people ask him his paintings are free to impart spiritual truths, he said.

He chooses colors carefully in depicting angels, prophets and spiritual beings. His works represent colors of spirituality. Blue represents a spiritual state. Yellow represents a state of sanctification, violet, royalty, gold is his favorite color because it reminds him of heaven.

One picture depicts a ghost-like figure in blue tones that stands in a prairie fashion. The picture represents the ultimate experience with the heavens, Williams said. It is the ability of freedom, free from all stress in a state of joy and bliss, he said.

Most of his work is done in oils. Williams estimates that he has painted on hundreds of art pieces in his lifetime. He never wants to stop.

Williams remembers when he used to ride his bike from St. Martinville to Lafayette and "hustled my paintings all over".

Heritage Art Gallery in the Oil Center in Lafayette was instrumental in showing his early works and helping him get started. One of his paintings is on permanent display at the University of Southwestern Louisiana's University Art Museum. The painting is part of the showcase featuring Louisiana artists.

His works are highly personal," said USL Art Museum curator Herman Mhre. "The images he creates stem from his imagination, and he has a strange current of spirituality running through the works."

Mhre said Williams has achieved success despite tremendous economic and social odds.

Growing up, he lived with seven brothers and one sister in a one-bedroom shotgun house that his father died when the artist was young, leaving the family to fend for itself. Williams worked at odd jobs, mowing grass, cleaning up a print shop, sweeping the floors of art shops.

"I collected pencils as a child to express myself. I would dip twigs in ink to paint. Mama couldn't afford paint supplies, so I made use of what I had."

When Williams entered the seventh grade, art teacher Rufus Arnold spotted his talent and sent him to the ears of Saints. "He picked up on instruction much faster than the other students and always applied it," Arnold said, who is a former professor at Notre Dame.

"He always had a spiritual attitude. I mean we were in a country school, and this one guy stood out. He would do all this work at home and bring it in for my suggestions. It got to the point where I couldn't tell my work apart from his."

"Coming from a hard background makes me want to be the best I can be," Williams said. "I'm growing, not just artistically, but spiritually, too. I believe we should study to 'show thyself approved.'"

Williams credits his mother for his strong religious background.

"I would say 99 percent of the things I do involve the fear of God and the joy of life," he said. "Mama is a God-fearing Christian, and Mama taught me to pray the rosary. She is an inspiration of love."

Williams traded his first works for furnishings for his mother's house. Soon he is going to refurbish the outside of her home, he said.

"I believe success lies in the struggle along the way," Williams said. "If I can leave one person with a spiritual enlightenment in this life, that will mean more than any painting I could create."