In creating, the artist draws nearer to his own creator

Dennis Paul Williams

is special. Ask anyone who knows him. They smile at the mention of his name. There may be variations on the response, but it goes something like this:

"Dennis? Oh, we lovevve Dennis. He's so special. So spiritual. So sincere. We just love him."

People appreciate the artist's talent and creative vision and, perhaps even more importantly, they revere him as a human being — although the art and the person are so tightly enmeshed it would seem impossible to separate the two.

The man is his art. The art is the man. Both are highly spiritual — not religious, Williams cautions, but spiritual.

"When I start my painting, I try to pray over my image," Williams said one crisp fall morning at his St. Martinville studio. "I try to put the Word in it so subconsciously that it becomes a ministry, too."

The weathered green structure, more than a century old, that is home to his imagination is adorned with multiple crucifixes and other religious icons. A tattered, paint-splattered Bible is nearby. Even his music system plays a zealous sermon or spiritual music. But finding his studio is not a particularly easy task. He has no sign.

"There is no significance in not having a sign. Signs are symbols of insecurity. If you have the truth, they will find you," he explains, "I believe that if a person lives right, they don't have to advertise."

Williams, a professional artist, has been selected to design the 1995 Festivale Internationale poster. Although receiving some training at USL, Williams claims to be mainly self-taught. Overall, he is knowledgeable in the old masters as well as current trends.

His expertise covers the gamut, including drawings, monotype, watercolors, oils, etching, gouache, collage, block prints, contemporary prints and mixed media.

Whatever the medium, the artist succeeds. Some collectors of William's work have expressed a need for spirituality and somehow feel closer to the creator in the presence of his art.

"I'm thankful that I'm getting some sense of success from my work, not in economics, but to help someone become more comfortable with self," Williams said. "That the person becomes enlightened or made illuminated by the experience."

Last year, City Club of Lafayette featured a one-man exhibit titled "A Spring Showing of the Joyous, Spiritual Artworks by Dennis Paul Williams."

He has been featured in many exhibits in Louisiana, as well as far and away places such as California and Japan. His art is highly regarded by local collectors such as author Ernest Gaines and attorney J. Minos Simon, who has around 20 pieces, including a sculpture.

In addition, Williams has been the subject of many writers. Among them, he is featured in a recent issue of "Callaloo," a Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

The cover features Williams' painting, "Blue Soul" from "The Angel Series.

His art is all originals, ranging in price from $75 to $11,000 — whatever the market can bear. "I'm a Fine Artist," he says, "not a commercial artist."

On a personal note, Williams is married to the former Paulette Dells Raymond. Employed by Normal Life, she designs programs for handicapped people, he said. They have two children: Ryan....
was barred from art class. It was a devastating experience from which he has never fully recovered.

Over time, Williams' health grew stronger. He credits the recovery to the prayers of his mother, Florita Hypolite Williams, who gave her son up to God at a young age. After high school, Williams joined the Marines and was able to complete his term. Still, he was an artist at heart. While taking classes at USL, the young man from St. Martinville would often ride his bicycle or hitch hike. Still, her persevered.

Whatever the situation, Williams is not defeated— but, instead, is made stronger by adversity.

"I recognize the tribulation not as a hardship but as a blessing," he explained. "Every situation I've been through, there are lessons to count. I've learned the value of tribulation."

Although knowledge may begin in a structured environment, such as a classroom, Williams does not believe that it ends there. A voracious reader, he has studied art book after art book, the teachings of the earliest philosophers, and the religions of the Middle East and Far East.

But Christianity is the only religion he has studied, he says, in which the leader rose from the dead. For this reason, the Christ figure is the abiding theme in most of his paintings.

Far removed from the serenity of spiritual art, however, Williams has a different creative side. He plays several musical instruments in his brother's band, "Nathan and the Zydeco Cha-Chas." World travelers, they are performing in concert in Istanbul in December.

Wherever Williams goes, however, a sense of urgency and lack of time persists. But the sense of encroaching death, he says, has become his strength.

"I'm not afraid to die," the artist confides, "but I'm afraid to die not doing what I was supposed to do."