



# The Power of Art

Capturing that 'Shining Elusive Element'

By Betsa Marsh

"What was any art," author Willa Cather wondered, "but a mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself - life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose."

For more than two centuries, Miamians have been snatching handfuls of life as it darts past, capturing elusive moments in measures of music, stanzas of poetry, strokes of paint.

Miami has helped launch scores of world-class artists and performers, and with President David Hodge designating 2011-2012 the Year of the Arts, it seems a perfect time to salute them. Artist-illustrator C.F. Payne '76 has created covers for *Time* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *der Spiegel* - and *MAD Magazine*. Abstract metal sculptor and painter Fletcher Benton '56 has his kinetic sculptures in collections around the globe.

In music, trumpeter Jono Gasparro '08, special projects manager to musician/composer Wynton Marsalis, played with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra for Wynton's 50th birthday concert on PBS in October. Steven Reineke '93 is music director of the New York Pops and principal pops conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra.

Actor Eric Lange '95 has been moving between TV and film, with recent roles as mad scientist Stuart Radzinsky in "Lost," distraught Coach Stupak in "Modern Family," and horse race betting expert Andy Beyer in the Disney film "Secretariat."

Whatever the medium, each artist reaches out for Cather's shining elusive element, calling on a creativity that lies deep within each psyche. A quartet of Miami artists reveals a bit about their process and work.



## Colors speak to her

The little blue skiff nudges into the shoreline as plumes of amber and scarlet shoot off the banks like solar flares.

The water is still, the boat is empty. There's an air of aloneness, if not outright loneliness, about the little blue boat. Yet Sabre Smith Esler '87 sees nothing like desolation, calling the piece "Higher Ground" and saying, "Boats mean possibilities. They can take you somewhere."

It's all in the perception, of course, and that split second of awareness is what Esler tries to freeze-frame in every scene she paints.

"I try to capture the energy in that certain moment," she says from her Atlanta studio. "It's a spark: It's there and

it's gone. Light is an energy force field - an artist friend calls this the 'perceptual moment.' You can overpaint and lose it."

So Esler attacks her canvas quickly with a palette knife in an economy of line, striving for "the mastery of the eye to see it right the first time." Whether it's a drifting little rowboat, obscure figures huddled under beach umbrellas, or abstract pedestrians angling across a courtyard.

And of her captivating boatscapes, with jewel tones no sailor has seen, she focuses on "their quiet, their stillness. They're kind of dreamy. The boat is a vehicle to a different time, place, and emotion."

One critic has said her works "transport the viewer from the harsh



Boatscapes, such as this one, which artist Sabre Smith Esler '87 titled "Higher Ground," are among her favorites to paint. She is drawn to the fierce energy of Abstract Expressionist painters.



contemporary world ... to the idealized world of memory." The critic went on to say, "With her expanding audience of collectors, Sabre stands on the cusp of much larger influence. ... Consequently, her previous regional appeal has expanded beyond St. Simons and Atlanta to collectors aggressively seeking her work in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C."

"Where do we find our clarity?" Esler muses. "I think we find it in quiet places. Maturity brings that. Most creative people when they do their art are looking for that child-like joy you have to have, to capture that certain emotion."

While she looks for that frisson of emotion in cityscapes, landscapes, and still lifes, her favorites are her boatscapes and figurative pieces. "The figurative is so much more challenging, to make it look like that figure could be walking down the street."

She's drawn to the fierce energy of Abstract Expressionist painters such as de Kooning, Rothko, and Pollock. "They said, 'I can manipulate what I see depending upon how I feel about it.' For me, that's joyful, happy energy."

When Esler meets people at galleries and they ask that old bromide, "What do you paint?" she says, "I paint everything I love – and that's everything."

Look closely and you may find words painted behind the images. "I love to read, especially poetry, and I wish I could have been a writer. We studied a lot of philosophy in interdisciplinary studies at Miami, which I combined with art, and I'll think about philosophy. And I'll listen to music, and maybe the lyrics I'm pondering will come out in the painting.

"The words are my little exclamation point I paint – what I was thinking about at the time.

"Sometimes I do find I'm awake but I'm dreaming – I get into a transcendental place listening to my music and the colors are speaking to me. It does happen, and I love when I can capture that certain moment of energy."