



Master painters learn to see with new eyes

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At the Ogden Museum last month, two celebrated fine artists, Bo Bartlett and Betsy Eby, previewed a documentary film they had

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made together with a hand-held camera. In the opening scenes, it appeared to tell a simple love story.

The artist reception for Eby's delightful, melodic paintings had been held earlier that day. One of Bartlett's monumental tableaux hangs nearby among the museum's permanent collection. The couple met just a decade ago at a reception for Bartlett's paintings, where they felt an immediate connection. The wedded couple now share a life filled with artistic discovery.

Following the public event, a small group convened in the darkened Patrick F. Taylor Library auditorium to watch their intimately filmed cross-country road trip, a quest for ordinary beauty.

"There is a feeling in this life, often overlooked, of being alive, of seeing something you've never seen before, the way the light falls across a wall, or a face or a field," Bartlett recorded himself saying in the film. "Sometimes it is triggered by a sound, a distant train. It's a feeling of awareness. But sometimes, art induces these feelings. It wakes us up. And it can activate emotions, deep emotion, like nostalgia — painful and beautiful."



“It is important to move through the world with this kind of wonder,” he added.



Betsy Eby and Bo Bartlett somewhere on the road.

They drove past herds of buffalo and across vast Western landscapes to historic landmarks such as Mount Rushmore and Wounded Knee battlefield, stopping to enjoy lighter moments at a



country fair and to visit Royal Street in New Orleans, even as the city was still reeling after Hurricane Katrina.

“We were wanting to make this movie about really opening your eyes,” Eby says.

Minutes into the film, however, their adventure took a bewildering turn. The carefree road trip became unsettling as Bartlett’s eyesight, so critical to his ability to observe and depict American life, rapidly deteriorated. “It’s like I’m going blind,” he says of a sensation similar to a snowstorm clouding his vision. Convinced the problem was merely the quickening onset of cataracts, he would have postponed a medical examination, but Eby insisted he check it out. An optometrist performed tests that might rule out the possibility of a brain tumor.

“We were making a movie about seeing and then suddenly, Bo can’t see,” Eby says.

The artistic orientations of Bartlett and Eby could hardly be more different. A classically trained pianist, she alternately plays music and paints, taking a “ride on the crest of crescendos and



decrescendos.” Using an ancient process known as encaustic painting, she fuses pigments, sap and wax together with a blowtorch to create abstract paintings, inspired by natural forms. In contrast, Bartlett’s large, hyper-realistic, figurative paintings often reveal difficult truths about “the human condition,” she says.

Painting side-by-side at their homes in Columbus, Ga., and on an island off the coast of Maine, she fills her art with emotion while his approach, though detached, is packed with symbolic meaning. The union has given their lives and their art new dimensions.

“Finally, after all this struggle and all these years, you don’t want to anymore. You’ve simply had enough of drowning and you want to live and you want to love, and you will walk across any territory and any darkness however foolish and however dangerous, to take the one hand you know belongs in yours,” Bartlett reflected.

On the road trip, his disease took a bizarre twist as he began experiencing visual hallucinations in a neurological condition later diagnosed as Charles Bonnet Syndrome. He saw images stored in his memory instead of objects that were real.



“As an artist, if you can’t trust what you’re seeing, what can you trust?” Bartlett asks.

An MRI at Mount Sinai Hospital confirmed a large tumor growing on his pituitary gland was pressing on the optic nerves. It needed to be removed right away.

“In the days leading up to surgery, the blindness was becoming more extreme by the hour. Had we waited any longer, the optic nerve would’ve been permanently damaged and blindness would’ve been permanent,” Bartlett says.

The ability to see not only posed a physical problem, but his ability to manifest art.

“Being a visual person, it is extremely disorienting to not be able to focus clearly on one thing. How will I live? How will I survive if I can’t look from object to object when I am painting? How will I survive when I can’t see?” he asks.

He had no choice but to undergo immediate surgery.



“There are two potential outcomes. Now that I’ve found love and happiness, my life has reached a pinnacle, and it could descend and even be over. Or it could be the beginning of writing a whole new story and this chapter begins the rest of my life.”

Fortunately, the surgery was successful.

Asked by an audience member if his sight had been perfectly restored, Bartlett admits he sees somewhat differently. Because the pituitary gland controls many hormones, Bartlett’s emotional responses have changed.

“The difference in how I see could be more related to the hormonal component – how I feel about what I see,” he says.

On their road trip, Bartlett and Eby met with American master painter Andrew Wyeth who had once mentored Bartlett. Wyeth emphasized the importance of spontaneity and staying open to seeing life with fresh eyes even if the moment is “imperfect.”

Medical tests revealed Bartlett’s artistic gift is really due to a physical defect.



“After surgery, follow-up scans happened to reveal the absence of a left vertebral artery, an anomaly from birth. This, unrelated to the pituitary, explains my strong, right brain skills and my lesser developed left brain skills. So, I experience the world visually. I’m really an artist by biology,” Bartlett says.

“Painting with Fire” will be on view at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art through October 25. An accompanying monograph of the exhibition, Betsy Eby (Hardcover/\$40.00/152 pages), is available in the Ogden Museum Store.