

Connecting to nature

By Megan Bennett / Journal North Reporter

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Aside from paintings and prints, Matthew Mullins is also a sculptor. Pictured here is a found wood sculpture covered fully in graphite. (Courtesy of Matthew Mullins)

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SANTA FE, N.M. — Matthew Mullins’ “The Sun in Our Bones” tells the origin story of the elements that make up the human body.

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The painting, framed by a piece of bare linen with hands drawn at each edge, has a large scene of the cosmos in its middle.

Elements like phosphorous and calcium all come from the stars, the 35-year-old artist noted. And when stars explode, those things get sent out into space and become part of the human construct.



Matthew Mullins' painting "The Sun in Our Bones" uses pigments made of animal bone and cobalt to depict a cosmic scene. (Courtesy of form & concept)

In addition to utilizing cobalt, another element found in stars, Mullins used the pigment "Bone Black" to make his starry scene. This paint, made up of burnt animal bones, is meant to symbolize the human life that wouldn't exist without stars.

"I see this painting as almost like a timeline starting in the middle," said Mullins. "The creation of the elements in the stars being distributed out into the universe, and eventually that leads to human consciousness and our ability to even reflect on that, which I think is pretty amazing."

“Those elements that are enabling us to have these thoughts about it, it’s almost like they’re kind of looking back on themselves.”

The title of his cosmic piece became the namesake of the Santa Fe artist’s larger solo exhibition. Dozens of his paintings, sculpture work and photo prints will be on display at form & concept gallery starting tonight, all following a similar theme of exploring humans’ connections to the world around them.

“It’s an intuitive process that was designed to get me and art viewers more integrated with nature, and make us feel more connected to the cosmos and make the far-away cosmos feel closer,” Mullins said of his creations.

Exploring the human-nature relationship has long been a focus of the Bay Area native’s work. But his imagery and subject matter has changed since moving to Santa Fe in late 2011.

During a visit to his Santa Fe studio last week, Mullins pointed to a laboratory scene he painted when he was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. Back then, he said, he was more interested in exploring places where humans were trying to figure out nature in a more scientific way. But since arriving in New Mexico, where he became an avid hiker and runner on the local trails, he said his work has become more of a personal journey of how he is becoming more connected with his natural surroundings.

“When I told other painter friends in the Bay Area I was coming to New Mexico, they were like, ‘Oh, don’t become one of those landscape painters’ and ‘You know what it’s like on Canyon Road; don’t do that,’ ” he recalled.

“I don’t know. It’s really silly. And as soon as I came out here, it became a big part of my life. And it seems the same kind of core ideas are there, trying to integrate with nature more and really understand our place in nature more.”

The artist’s work depicts scenes that are both space-like – like “The Sun in Our Bones” – as well as ones from here on Earth.

Several of his landscape paintings will be included in the show. These landscapes, made from pictures he’s taken of Lake Katherine, looking out onto the Pecos Wilderness, and at other spots, include non-natural patterns made from mica-filled paint. Mullins first paints the entire canvas with the metallic-colored paints, outlines the patterns he wants with tape, and then creates the landscape in between the taped off areas.

“It creates this really interesting way of seeing through something,” gallery owner Frank Rose said of this technique. “It’s almost like seeing through your own human lens.”

Mullins thinks of the patterns as a representation of the human experience of being out there nature.

“If you’re in one of these places or in nature just staring off into the trees, I feel the mind kind of wanders a little bit,” he said. “Like you’re looking at the landscape, but other thoughts come in. You lose it, and then you see the landscape.

“So I like the representational qualities with the landscape, as well as the abstract patterns. The brain can go from experiencing the depth and light of the landscape to the flatness and rhythm of the abstraction. The brain toddles back and forth, and it creates a more dynamic experience that’s kind of uncontrollable.”

Similar to these works, most of his other pieces involve pieces of New Mexico’s wilderness. A new medium for him is sculpture work, which he makes using found wood.

He covers most of his wood pieces with graphite, a material that he said naturally polishes and cleans out the wood. But during a tour of his studio last week, he also showed off a stump that he simply smoothed with a wire brush, then covered the base with a copper-colored, mica-filled paint. “It was like a big chunk of charcoal,” he said of that piece, which he found hiking in the Jemez Mountains after wildfires had come through. “I was thinking about the Japanese architectural process called Shou sugi ban where you burn the outer part of the wood to make it fireproof and bug proof. But underneath the first inch of char, there’s still really solid fresh wood. I was thinking that probably happened with a lot of these burnt pieces that are littering this space.”

Mullins has also expanded his interest in photography to capture a new way of viewing outdoor locations. Using aluminum cans, Mullins made several pinhole cameras, an old-style camera



that instead of a lens has a small aperture that burns the image of the outside world onto photo paper. He said he left the cans on trees in

In his solo show opening tonight, Santa Fe artist Matthew Mullins will display several images he made using pinhole cameras he left in New Mexico forests. “Obsidian Ridge,” named after the area where the pinhole camera was left near the Valles Caldera, represents eight months of sun paths across the sky. (Courtesy of form & concept)

places like Santa Fe’s Sun and Atalaya mountains – at any given time, he said he could have 20 cameras stationed – and he made maps for himself to remember where each was left.

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“They’re usually there, but sometimes they just disappear, even though I was totally sure it was taped to this tree,” he said. “Sometimes, the cameras are squished – I think from elk rubbing against them.”

Traditionally, pinhole cameras images come from 20-second or one-minute exposure times. But Mullins’ cameras had exposures ranging from four days to eight months. Instead of putting the negatives in developing solution back at his studio – he said the paper’s long-term exposure to light would have made it turn all black – he scans the paper and flips the negative digitally.

Mullins said he created the can cameras to “record time in a different way.” He pointed to an image made from one of his cameras left at Obsidian Ridge near the Valles Caldera for eight months. A large band of white lines and purple lines waves across the blue-tinted landscape, each one representing the sun’s path

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across the sky each day.

“It’s a photograph, but it’s a photograph of every single moment of every single day for eight months,” he said. “It shows the earth’s rotation around the sun and the shifting of the Earth’s axis. I was hoping these photos would shift our perception a little bit, like our planetary perception. We’re on this planet that’s going around the sun, and the sun’s going around the Milky Way – just to make our world bigger.”





“The Sun in Our Bones” will be up at form & concept until Nov. 17.


<p>If you go</p> <p>WHAT: Matthew Mullins’ ‘The Sun in our Bones’</p> <p>WHEN: Until Nov. 17. The opening reception is tonight from 5-7 p.m. An artist talk is Oct. 20 from 2-3 p.m.</p> <p>WHERE: form & concept, 435 S. Guadalupe</p>	<p>VISIONS WEST CONTEMPORARY</p> <p><small>34 West Main St. Bozeman, MT 406.522.9946 2605 Walnut St. Denver, CO 303.292.0909 130 S. Jackson St. Jackson, WY 307.264.1553 108 S. Main St. Livingston, MT 406.222.0337 visionswestcontemporary.com</small></p>
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