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It's a show about monsters (maybe) and it opens Friday

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Michael Stillion with his painting Pretending to Be a Bat. ([Daily Record/Cid Standifer](#))

Roswell Artist in Residence Michael Stillion's upcoming show at the Roswell Museum and Art Center is billed as a show about monsters. But, when pressed, Stillion has to admit that he can't exactly explain what a monster is.

"I guess I've always tried to avoid calling them monsters, really," he said.

Stillion admits that his current trend of painting strange creatures that have at least a few human features started with the idea of monsters. While he was living in Vermont, he started to toy with the idea because of something one of his childhood heroes, astronaut John Glenn, said in an interview: We train to be ready for anything, basically.

Well, thought Stillion, did they train to be ready for monsters?

His first works in the theme were two paintings called "Self Portrait as a Monster," and he's painted a few other monsters, including "Red Haired Monster" and "Rainbow Monster," but none of the works in his current show bear the term, and he's not sure which ones would earn it.

Most of his sketches on display bear a close resemblance to human beings. Between bouts of painting, Stillion did a series of sketches he calls "Prison Muses," which were done in front of the television while watching a prison reality show. The cubistic pictures have distorted features, with eyes and noses that drift away from their traditional places on a human face. Whenever Stillion needed to reference a real person, he would look up at the characters on the television screen. While he says he didn't think about it at the time, he also snuck in features from people he knew, resulting in two called "Prison Muse Mom" and "Prison Muse Dad."

Stillion doesn't know if they're monsters.

"I think it's up to the viewer to decide that one," he said.

Another one, called "Happy Mask," of a human torso - based on a baroque painting by Diego Velasquez - with a cloud of brightly-colored rings around its head, Stillion at first declared was definitely not a monster. Until it was pointed out that he'd never seen the body without the mask. He admitted that, yes, it could secretly be a monster underneath.

Most of his paintings look more definitively monster-like, although perhaps not of the menacing, closet-hiding, child-snatching variety. Stillion thinks most of them look comic at first, but he also wants them to inspire sympathy.

In "Boat," a crowd of brightly-colored monsters in a tiny vessel approaches what seems to be a waterfall surrounded by a dark and dreary background. Stillion said the painting originally had a landscape in the distance, but he thought it gave the despairing scene too much hope, so he painted it out. One creature who has fallen overboard stretches his arm out of the water for help.

In "Pretending to Be a Bat," a face perched atop a human neck stretches its splattered wings, trying desperately to pass for a winged rodent.

Looking at an unnamed Bigfoot-like desert-dwelling creature referred to only as "The Wanderer," Stillion says, "This guy is pathetic. ... He's just sort of down on his luck. This is a down-on-his-luck monster."

In a series of paintings, the solitary wanderer finds a log with branches that remind him of arms and a bump that could be a nose, and

carries it with him for company. He also steals a cow to help him carry the random things he finds, and ends up jumping into a lake to escape a fire that, Stillion says, was probably his fault. In the largest painting, he stares broodingly into the distance.

Looking closely, the viewer can see bits of colorful twine wrapped around dead tree branches in the background. In one, the wanderer has propped up a cactus that was leaning too much.

"He decorates the things around him, trying to make it a little better, a little more homey feeling," explained Stillion.

On a few of the paintings, Stillion has attached long dangling "accessories," made from found objects and things he could imagine being in Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards' hair.

"They're kind of like earrings for paintings," Stillion said.

Like the wanderer, he added, "I collect things a lot."

While the wanderer's landscape is reminiscent of the New Mexico desert, Stillion said that he has never considered what he would do if he ran into the creature. If he ever meets John Glenn, they may have to talk it over.

A gallery opening for Stillion's show will be held on Friday at RMAC. Stillion will give a lecture about his work at 5:30 p.m., followed by a reception from 6 to 7 p.m.

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