

Making a lasting impression



Vitale in his basement studio

some of his paintings done between 1978 and 1989.

“The artist’s maximalist abstractions feature elaborate compositions in which thousands of impasto brushstrokes are overlaid on fields of color, creating undulating layers of graphic instability that make one’s eyes dance—even ache,” the article stated. “Their optical effects cannot be properly photographed, but must be parsed in person for their dizzying illusionistic effects to emerge. An encounter with his work offers up a deeply physical experience, in sharp contrast to our virtual lives and the consumption of digital images to which we are now habituated.”

“That’s kind of an honor,” Vitale noted. “Not many people get in *Artforum*.”

To appreciate his work, it helps to understand what impressionism and abstract art are.

Impressionism is a practice begun by French painters in the late 1800s that involves showing the natural appearances of objects using dabs or thin strokes of colors to depict actual reflected light. Vitale said that as a youngster, his family would go to the Detroit Institute of Arts: “I remember studying paintings, and some of my favorites were the impressionists—like you look in and really study them.”

Then there’s abstract art, which doesn’t attempt to represent external reality, but seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colors and textures. In his teens, Vitale saw a quilt at his great-aunt’s farm where he spent summers that helped him see the power

“It’s kind of an abstract impressionism,” Carlo Vitale says of his unique style of painting, which has been a lifelong passion.

The South Macomb, MI Branch 4374 member’s artwork can be seen in many public institutions in his state, including the Blue Cross Blue Shield headquarters of Detroit; Henry Ford hospitals and medical centers throughout Detroit, Royal Oak and Macomb; Wells Fargo of Grosse Pointe; Wayne State University’s art collection; the Detroit Institute of Arts; and the University of Michigan’s museum.

His work has received critical acclaim, such as a writeup of a 2022 gallery exhibit in *Artforum*, an international monthly magazine focusing on contemporary art. The exhibit featured



of color and patterns. “I remember that she had an unfinished quilt that was my great-great-grandmother’s,” he said. “I used to see all these patterns, which are quite complicated in the intricacy of needle and thread and this and that. And, I will say, that that did play a big part in how I create my works of art.”

One shocking—literally—experience greatly affected the way he saw color. While in fifth grade, lightning struck a Dutch elm tree above the car he was in with his father and “took the car,” he said. The lightning had sent an electrical current under the car and shocked it into the air. “The experience was kind of like the negative of a photograph—there was no color. Everything which is light in color was bright as could be, and which was dark in color, this is dark.”

Art was an important focus in Vitale’s family, as his father and sister were into various types of dance, his mother did some amateur acting, and his brother was into sculpture. Growing up just 5 miles from Detroit, they’d frequent art exhibits. While visiting art museums in his late teens, Vitale found himself drawn to the experience of seeing certain paintings in person. “I discovered that they do optical things, like in minimal art,” he said. “If you take [20th-century abstract artist] Josef Albers and you stare at the squares, they’ll bounce back and forth and blend in to be one.”

He realized that some art is metaphorical. “Well, I kind of discovered mine was, and did this optical effect that was very similar to what I experienced as a kid in this accident,” Vitale said. “And so I thought, well, who in history did this happen to? And I noticed that [19th-century French post-Impressionist artist Georges Pierre]

Seurat’s paintings, when you stare at them, they do the same optical effect as mine. I don’t know if [my work is the] next step, but it’s a continuation of that work in the present day.

“Impressionism is about capturing the moment,” he adds, “and there’s different types of moments. Like, Jackson Pollock—they say that he knew something metaphysically about explosions. And that comes out of Monet. The drip paintings are the next step for Monet’s Water Lilies. Well, what I do comes kind of out of Seurat.”

After graduating from Wayne State University with a master’s degree in fine arts, Vitale found that there weren’t many jobs in the art field and so he turned to the Postal Service. “But I loved it, because it was outdoor work, and I was used to that working at my cousin’s farms,” he said.

Vitale, who can quote poems by Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson from memory, never gave up on his art. In the meantime, he said, “I painted at home, and I raised a family. I married an artist that I met downtown at the Detroit artists’ market.”

He soon had an opportunity to show a work in a local art gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. “It’s hard to get in there,” he said,



The artist with one of his paintings at an exhibit





Working on a painting in 1977



adding, “so, I put everything I could into it, and it took off.” Being part of that collection helped get his foot in the door of the Detroit art scene.

Vitale’s art eventually appeared in institutions such as Blue Cross Blue Shield, mostly as a result of word of mouth. An art collector with a connection to Wayne State’s art department supported the carrier’s art by including it in his collection. “He used to go to look around at the artists in Detroit, or Wayne State in particular, the students, and he would pick out who he was going to support, and he didn’t pick a lot of them,” Vitale said. And something caught his eye about what I was doing. He decided to support me, and I was in his collection. So that created a little name around town.”

Another man who owns a Wells Fargo branch bought a piece. That patron also donated a few pieces to a cancer research hospital. And then two other hospitals saw the work and representatives inquired about pieces as well.

Vitale gained acclaim in the Detroit area over the years, and along with selling some art around town, he’s had occasional shows in galleries and has had collectors put his pieces in art museums.

He has shipped artwork to buyers in New York and Los Angeles. The average price for his art is around \$5,000 for a 5-by-4 or 6-by-4 painting, though he’s sold pieces for more.

The carrier retired from the Postal Service last year after nearly four decades of delivering, and now paints

every day in his basement art studio, usually around five hours each day, but sometimes up to 11 hours. His paintings are mostly oil paint—“it’s a little bit more professional,” he says—but he does some acrylic and watercolor on occasion.

His pieces, on average, take a month and a half to create, though a recent one took nearly four months. “I don’t like a quick work of art,” he said. “I’m capable of doing that, but I chose to leave something that’s sort of like meat and potatoes. I like to show work. I remember how my aunt made the quilts—they’re tedious.”

Asked where he hopes to go from here, Vitale joked, “Well, I’d love to make the Whitney biennial, but a miracle happens every day,” referencing the exhibition of top contemporary American art organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Vitale is taking it day by day, painting as often as he can, hoping to reopen a gallery again soon, and waiting to see what opportunities pop up.

He’s also watching his family’s interest in art blossom and continue down the family line. “I’ve got three daughters that are artists,” he says, adding that they all went through the art department at Wayne State as well.

Vitale can’t quite put his finger on why art is his passion. “I just love it,” he says. “It’s natural, and something I’m good at, and I really love doing it. I think it’s in my blood.” **PR**