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New Downing Museum gallery inspired by tornado impact

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"When the Lake Touched the Sky" is featured in Lennon Michalski's "Cos

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MORE INFORMATION



Horses of Hope:
Art project
raising tornado
relief funds

At first look, the painting is a chaotic explosion of color and movement, interrupted only by a dark blue funnel figure extending from the top left corner of the canvas to its center.

On a second glance, the swaths of rainbow hues overlay an entirely different picture underneath, delineated by sharp outlines of construction materials and assorted objects randomly dispersed in space by a dark blue tornado.

The painting is the namesake of a new gallery at Downing Museum – “Cosmetic Construction” – created by Lexington artist Lennon Michalski and inspired by the tornadoes of last December.



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Michalski painted the pieces as he was helping out with the Horses of Hope project, the painting of ceramic horses by high school art students in the three counties most impacted by the storm – Hopkins County, Graves County and Warren County. The horses will be auctioned in December at Keeneland to raise money for tornado relief.

Michalski chose to help the Warren County team because he has family in Bowling Green, he said. While working on the project, he heard the students talk about their experiences of the storm.

“When I was making the horse, that was a lot of the dialogue that we went back and forth on – those people they knew and how it changed their regular day and activities for a while and then eventually the rebuilding,” Michalski said.

Downing Museum Director Jack LeSieur had already offered Michalski a gallery spot at some point after he’d helped curate one of the museum’s shows. They decided to display it from Aug. 9 to Sept. 17 and

coordinate it with the traveling horse show's three-day stop in Bowling Green in late August.

Michalski brought his conversations during the Horses of Hope project to his gallery pieces, which focus on human reliance on technology and how that was impacted during the storm and its aftermath, when families were unable to get in touch with each other, call for help or use electricity to cook in their homes.

“Once the tornado hit, it severed a lot of those interactions,” he said. “When you hear a tornado, a lot of times it's the very direct impact on the houses and things being torn up and people being homeless, and so I'm trying to bring them to a different side that they may not think of as immediately.”

Each of the collection's pieces go in one of two artistic directions, Michalski said.



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“One is a subject matter that you can recognize,” he said. “The other one is more visceral and hopefully tells the story more in a subliminal context where you have a lot of movement and structural elements that look like they’re coming apart and being rebuilt.”

One painting, “Laptop Lilies,” depicts yellow laptops with hanging cords resembling growing flowers against a

slightly menacing purple backdrop.

“How to Curtail the Pink Truck” is somewhat of a hidden-picture game, with items like a stove, traffic light, hair dryer, toilet and a tree visible amidst a pink-orange swirl surrounding the painting’s central pink truck. The happier, floral mood is meant not to diminish the impact of the tornadoes but “to educate in a soft illustration.”

“With the horse that was what we wanted to do – not harp on putting a bunch of tornadoes and sad things on this horse but show that sense of hope and being reborn and regenerated with the floral aspects and the bright colors,” Michalski said. “I wanted to also translate that into my own personal show as well.”

“When the Lake Touched the Sky” is a combination of blues, turquoise and pink that’s become a crowd favorite, Michalski said.

“It has the rush of water feeling but also the energy that’s bound into it seems to be positive,” he said. “You can also take it both ways. You could

see how that could be a storm-like battle going on, but also it has a very whimsical feel to it.”

Michalski hopes that visitors come away with a sense of having had some kind of experience.

“They may not have to come away with something like a physical word or something that they could describe,” he said. “I wanted them to hit them viscerally, but something more immediate. That can kind of give them emotion and knowing that that emotion that they feel was derived from the tornado.”

– *More information about the Downing Museum is at www.jerryebakerfoundation.org/downing-museum/*

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