The Oregonian
THE OREGONIAN • FRIDAY, JUNE 5, 2009
a&e
Your arts and entertainment source
The Oregonian
review
BREAKING NEWS AT OREGONLIVE.COM
WINNER OF SEVEN PULITZER PRIZES

FRIDAY
JUNE 5, 2009

visual arts

gallery guide | reviews | events

» **Online:** Find out how art is changing Portland every day. Read D.K. Row's blog at: **http://blog.oregonlive.com/visualarts**

Paintings remove us from era of changes

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

Why are so many people in love with Daniel Robinson's paintings, the latest of which are on view at Charles A. Hartman Fine Art?

I'm not disagreeing with the flurry of positive response to the artist, based in Fossil. I'm actually a fan. Robinson's a fine artist of wonderfully painted images, for example. And though the recession has stifled collecting enthusiasm over the past year, Robinson's exhibit has sold quite well. Maybe that's another small, encouraging sign of a re-emerging market.

Rather, I'm just curious why Robinson's images of rural Oregon — roughly in the tradition of social realism and WPA-era artists — has a grip on us right now. The answer probably says a great deal about who we are and where we are heading during this exciting, historic era of urban transition, the post-Gilded Age.

So what does Robinson paint?

Ostensibly, the landscape mostly near his eastern Oregon home, but also beyond it. Slightly imposing, shadowy wheat and barley elevators; scenic paper mills; lonely upholstery storefronts; the iconic Willamette Falls; sturdy homes in Portland's Sellwood neighborhood; and other landscapes where the structures are usually stalwart ones and the clouds are pillowy white sheets suspended against blue skies.

In the especially compelling "Driftwood and Paper Mill," a hunk of driftwood idles in shallow water, while in the background boats drift by and the rugged industrial stone shapes of the paper mill rise above the scene. Robinson paints with soft clarity, and he uses color to suggest nature's quiet, powerful cast.

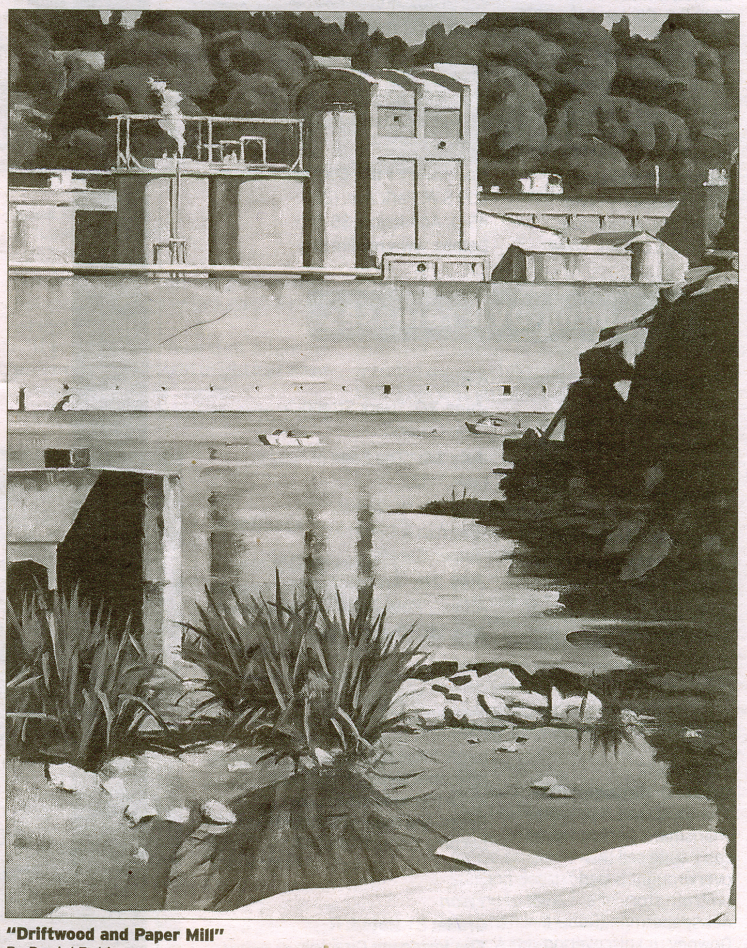
He's also a pliant craftsman of reflection and shadow. Robinson's learned well, for example, the lessons of Giorgio de Chirico, but he's turned the surrealist's masterful disruption of space into a less ominous mood shaper, a less foreboding presence. Still, the afternoon shadows of "Upholstery Shop" portray this Main Street-style storefront with a glumness reminiscent of Edward Hopper.

In a way, Robinson's not really painting Oregon. (He's popular in Boston, where he exhibited before showing at Hartman's gallery.) He's painting a place that seems eternally locked in sleepy, late-afternoon sun, a place where shadow and light is constant. These works elude the present day; we're visiting a place located somewhere in the past.

In his short essay for a handsome Nazraeli Press monograph on Robinson (produced in 2004), Brian Berger compares Robinson's paintings to those made by social realists and other artists who were part of the Works Progress Administration art projects during the Depression era. And, of course, he compares the New York-born but Portland-educated painter to Hopper.

I think Robinson's paintings share much in common with the work of Hopper,

Please turn to **Page 33**



"Driftwood and Paper Mill"
By Daniel Robinson

Paintings by Daniel Robinson

Where: Charles A. Hartman Fine Art, 134 N.W. Eighth Ave.

When: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Closes June 13.

Web site: www.hartman-fineart.net

Continued from Page 32

whose curiously stark paintings crystallized a closed-off mood during the Depression era. Though Robinson's paintings present a wider, grander expanse — we're not voyeurs looking into intimate bedrooms and curtained theaters — there's also an austerity, even loneliness in these paintings. Always, maybe strangely, these paintings are devoid of human beings.

Robinson easily could be seen as part of a group of locally represented painters who have, in different ways and for different reasons, dedicated themselves to painting the physical landscape of Portland and Oregon — Sally Cleveland, Roll Hardy, Debra Beers, Michael Brophy, Lli Wilburn. And like most of these artists, Robinson's paintings are roughly part of a continuing realist tradition, but they also have a tension and unease that tell us the artist is exploring other personal concerns besides straightforward documentation.

But perhaps the most compelling way to look at these works is within the framework of a changing era, the transition from mid-20th-century industry to something far more abstract and ephemeral. Robinson's paper mills and grain elevators, as well as other natural landscapes we often forget about, remind us of a past and a way of making things that may not return or thrive again in the same way — just like General Motors.

That's not a bad thing. This is a dizzying, electrifying time where time present is already time past and where eloquence is measured by 140 succinct words. It's an era beyond measurable history, beyond the usual metrics. Robinson's gaze at the present is already a sentimental, nostalgic one. They remind us of how fine and beautiful things were. And will be, no matter what.