

NEW WORK SHINES AT STARR'S 'STUDIO' AT MCA DENVER

By Mary Voelz Chandler

Jeff Starr, artist-in-residence at MCA Denver, sits in a re-creation of his studio, filled with some of his artwork, at the museum near Lower Downtown.

As the pace quickens at MCA Denver, with show after show coming on line, there's a fascinating place to seek some shelter on the second floor: a partial re-creation of Denver artist Jeff Starr's studio nestled under the title "The Wrath of Grapes."

Starr has been a painter and ceramist and now is painting again, continuing the mix of the surreal and the fantastical that has marked his work for decades.

Born in 1956 in New Jersey, he moved to Denver at age 15 when his father was transferred here. School was called learning by doing, and taking a painting course from the late John Fudge, whose work was all about the other side of reality.

The installation in the museum's Project Space focuses on Starr's new paintings, augmented by some older works - including the parodic Spanish-language action movie poster that inspired the show's title - and the kind of stuff that winds up on studio walls and studio tables.

It is, in short, a little slice of Starr, in a space much larger than the place in which he actually works. MCA director-curator Cydney Payton's first concept for this installation was for Starr to live here, an idea other museums have carried out with what appear to be excruciating results.



JEFF STARR, ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE AT MCA DENVER, SITS IN A RE-CREATION OF HIS STUDIO, FILLED WITH SOME OF HIS ARTWORK, AT THE MUSEUM NEAR LOWER DOWNTOWN. GEORGE KOCHANIEC JR. / THE ROCKY

That was not for Starr, though he is, in conjunction with this installation, serving as artist-in-residence at MCA, teaching workshops and, yes, sometimes hanging out in a gallery that in one corner looks like a studio.

"We took a picture of the studio, then re-created it," Starr said this week. Everything appears less condensed because this is not the actual 8-foot-by-8-foot studio he says looks "like a little chicken coop."

But the images on the walls and the books on the table offer clues to the creative process. A photo of a Cy Twombly sculpture is tacked next to Starr's 1992 painting Lucky; the subject matter may be different, but the shapes are nearly identical. A deconstructed portrait by friend Matt O'Neill hangs nearby.

On one bookshelf are examples of Starr's ceramics, which debuted several years ago at an MCA biennial. The works include a soft yellow-glazed tree stump, a subject that Starr gravitated toward and that now makes an appearance in the very red painting My Way.

The switch from three dimensions back to two took some work, he said. He'd tell himself, "Let's see if I can still do this." He started with the small monochromatic Selective Memory, then began to add color and work in a larger size.

The result is scenes that revolve around communities that seem to sprout from the earth, grow and then begin to decay.

That's fitting, since Starr and his partner, artist Susan Meyer, study Utopian communities (and she makes giant, complex constructions that depict them).

"I thought of the early Dutch landscapes that are teeming with activity. They have an anthill quality," Starr said. "Occasionally there's the silhouette of a building or a mountain in the distance." Basically, he said, "I drew a funny form, and now I have to fill it up."

Some structures appear to be falling down, others wear the badge of gentrification.

But really, "all of that comes to me after I've painted the picture. I'm looking for anything to fill that space. There's no real meaning necessarily. It's the pleasure of filling a blank terrain."

And here, in this space, getting a sense of how ideas take on a form, in clay or paint.



LEFT: BROKENBOROUGH BY JEFF STARR.
ABOVE: TWO MUSICIANS BY JEFF STARR.