

By Patricia Robert

Noted muralist downsizes to capture the cosmos



Circles in Space, acrylic and colored pencil on canvas, 30x24 inches, left, and Galaxy Core I, acrylic, ink and colored pencil on paper, 14x11 inches.

Richard Haas is known for his illusionist murals on buildings and walls in his home city, Yonkers, as well as in Manhattan, Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Munich, Germany.

Starting last year, Haas made a series of drawings and paintings that were smaller in scale, but not in subject matter. The result, “Circles in Space,” is a series of 16 works on view at the Hudson River Museum through Jan. 9, 2022.

“I have followed Richard’s work both personally and professionally for many years,” the chair of the museum’s curatorial department, Laura Vookles, said. “It is a joy to see this departure. His murals reflect an architectural eye. These look at the geometry of artistic forms in the universe.”

The colorful exhibition is in the Troster Gallery, outside the museum's planetarium, which reopens Friday, July 16. The exhibition also includes "Model for Proposed Mural on Planetarium Dome," which Haas painted on steel in 1990.

Haas and his wife, Katherine Solnikoff, moved to Yonkers 41 years ago. He has been a member of the Hudson River Museum's board of directors for 30 years.

The 84-year-old describes himself as "as a painter, a drawer, and printmaker." "Circles in Space" combines the first two, as he drew the series with colored pencils and then painted over most of the works with acrylic.

Due to the pandemic, Haas was unable to go to his studio in Manhattan for most of 2020. Being an artist who is always working on something, Haas began "Circles in Space" while at home. The work ranges in size from 8.5 by 11 inches to 24 by 30 inches.

The series celebrates subjects that fascinate him, including the Hubble Telescope, which was launched in 1990 and is still sending photographs of outer space back to earth.

"I can remember seeing the first photographs in the news," Haas said. "The universe opened up for me and I realized my miniscule human mind could not really contemplate its expanse and its frightening beauty."

The exhibition includes "Memory of the Hubble," made with acrylic, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, and Haas' interpretation of galaxies, influenced by his childhood visits to the Adler Planetarium in Chicago.

In addition, Haas made paintings that pay tribute to artists known for their chromatic experiments — Wassily Kandinsky (French, b. Russia, 1866–1944), Sonia Delaunay (French, b. Russia, 1885–1979), Robert Delaunay (French, 1885–1941), and Stanton MacDonald-Wright (American, 1890–1973).

Other paintings reflect Haas' observations, seen from the windows of airplanes, of the circular patterns of irrigation wells in the Midwest and in Asia, allowing him to think of Earth "as an endless sea of circular patterns as far as the eye can see."

Haas was inspired by the circular geometry of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, for whom he worked as a 19-year-old in Spring Green, Wis., where Haas grew up.

"We lived across the river from Wright's studio. My great uncle was Wright's stonemason," Haas said. "When my uncle told Wright that I had an interest in art, Wright said, 'Fine, bring him on.' So I was there off and on for a year or so, ostensibly laying stone. But, while there, I had access to drawers containing all of his drawings, dating back to the 1880s. It was a discovery on many levels."

Like Wright, Haas prefers using colored pencils and has some 300 to 400 hues.

Haas has a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and a master's in fine arts from the University of Minnesota. Early on, he earned his living as a teacher while he continued to work as an artist. In the late 1960s, he arrived in New York City where he became friends with Paul Goldberger, who would become an architecture critic for The New York Times. Goldberger introduced Haas to Doris Freedman, who worked in the administration of

Mayor John Lindsay. Subsequently, Haas was commissioned to paint murals in Soho and other locations in New York City.

Haas' work has received a host of accolades — the American Institute of Architects Medal of Honor (1977), Guggenheim Fellowship (1983), National Endowment of Arts Award (1987), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Distinguished Alumnus Award (1991), and the Jimmy Ernst Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2005). He was elected into the National Academy of Design in 1993 as an associate member, and became a full academician in 1994. He served as president of the Academy from 2009 to 2011.

In the late 1990s, Haas painted three murals about the history of Yonkers, dating back to its earliest days. Although landmarked, two were demolished, in 2016 and 2020. The one remaining panel is on the corner of Main Street and Riverdale Avenue.

When asked how he felt about his murals being demolished along with the buildings upon which they were painted, Haas replied, "Like it is with an architect, I don't think about longevity. It is all about finishing the project. And with these past months of being stuck in one place, I've had more time to concentrate on my smaller drawings and there have been many exciting moments in doing these."