Visions of the Cosmos
Astronomy-inspired artwork of

E. Lee Wilson, Jr.

The art gallery of the Eastern Florida State College Planetarium & Observatory
February 17 - June 11, 2016

In 1980, Carl Sagan wrote in his landmark book, Cosmos: “...the total number of stars in the universe is greater than all the grains of sand on all the beaches of the planet Earth.” Remembering this statement from watching Sagan’s Cosmos television series at age 20, Wilson explains, “The relationship between Earth’s bountiful sandy beaches and the incomprehensible vastness of the universe is a connection which I find to be both profound and exhilarating.”

In 2010, after returning from his first trip to the Caribbean, Wilson began to paint tropical beach scenes incorporating actual beach sand and seashells. In the summer of 2014, he purchased the DVD set of the new Cosmos series, and watched all 13 episodes within a couple of days. “The state-of-the-art visual effects showing the amazing majesty of the cosmos inspired me. I felt there was a connection between my passion for the beach and my love of the beauty of the night sky, so I began to paint my “Cosmos” series of artwork to communicate that inspiration. I paint the majesty of the cosmos – extraterrestrial elements, deep space, and the planets.”

In addition to incorporating sand and shells in his “Cosmos” series, Wilson uses diamond dust, as well as meteorite dust, and sometimes actual meteorite fragments. “I feel that embedding actual elements from the natural world into my work gives it a presence that just doesn’t happen otherwise.”

In the fall of 2015, Wilson’s artwork was included in an exhibition devoted to space art at the gallery of the Eastern Florida State College Planetarium & Observatory, sponsored by the Brevard Cultural Alliance. “While visiting the exhibition, I attended an astronomy presentation and joined in on an observatory session. I really enjoyed my time there, and decided I wanted to participate more fully in the mission of the planetarium – to make science enjoyable and more accessible to the public.”

My early Cosmos work focused on the starry luminance of the Milky Way in which the Earth is only a tiny part, and how that massive celestial assemblage resembles our terrestrial oceans. From a human perspective, standing alone on the beach of a continental coastline, the ocean seems so vast, so endless, so timeless. And yet, looking up at the night sky on a dark, clear night, the Milky Way seems like a vast ocean, where our tiny planet is adrift, floating free in the abyss of outer space.

Not only is there a similarity of size and distance between Earth’s oceans and our galaxy, but there is also of the magnitude of time. Our oceans are almost as old as the galaxy, but there is also of the magnitude of time. Our oceans are almost as old as the planet itself, and yet, our galaxy is even older – by billions of years. When looking up at the Milky Way late at night, we are seeing stars so far away, we are actually looking back in time when we see them – their light taking that long to reach our eyes.

Combining these two concepts provides the idea for the title of the above painting, Cosmos: Ancient Oceans.

My interpretation of the nebula image was to simplify the shapes and intensify the colors so that, in some ways, it resembles a solar eclipse. There is a small white dot in the center of the painting, which is a white dwarf star that has previously shed its outer layers as its fuel becomes exhausted (creating the colorful planetary nebula). It will slowly burn itself out as it cools. It resembles our terrestrial oceans. From

“...the total number of stars in the universe is greater than all the grains of sand on all the beaches of the planet Earth.”

“Cosmos: Ancient Oceans (triptych): mixed media (acrylic, beach sand, seashells, diamond dust, meteorite dust), 90"H x 48"V

Cover:
Death Star Prelude, was inspired by a Hubble space telescope image of the Helix Nebula. The nebula image was also used as part of the title graphics for Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey, hosted by Neil deGrasse Tyson. My interpretation of the nebula image was to simplify the shapes and intensify the colors so that, in some ways, it resembles a solar eclipse. There is a small white dot in the center of the painting, which is a white dwarf star that has previously shed its outer layers as its fuel becomes exhausted (creating the colorful planetary nebula). It will slowly burn itself out as it cools.

“My artwork stems from my interest in nature. I love the “organic” feel of natural things – irregular shapes; energetic paint movements; drizzles and splatters; rich, tactile textures; flat and glossy contrasts. I have a passion for what I create. This brochure is a record of the paintings in the exhibition, and my perspective of their meaning and significance.

– E. Lee Wilson, Jr.

This is the backside of a typical painting in the “Cosmos” series. With my fingers I have placed a meteorite dust smear on the canvas, using the same dust that was used on the front of the artwork. I have also included documentation that indicates the meteorite it came from and the source of the material (in this case, the Southwest Meteorite Laboratory, in Payson, Arizona). In addition, If a painting contains a meteorite fragment, documentation is also provided.
In some of the “Cosmos” paintings, I use my imagination rather than using a particular reference image, digesting and processing the multitude of imagery from my research. **Cosmos: Galactic Ballet of Light**, is an imaginary galaxy seen edge-on, showing the ballet of light that the dense clouds of stars and nebulas seem to dance as they move through the cosmos. The galactic center glows brightly, as if conducting the performance.

“Cosmos Portals” is a subset of the “Cosmos” series. It contains collages of smaller paintings joined together and painted as a whole. **Cosmos: Portals – Seven Views for Seven Sisters** is inspired by the Pleiades star cluster. Seven portals are represented in separate canvases, showing seven different views from different points in the galaxy, through seven different telescopes on seven different imaginary inhabited worlds. Each painting is only focused on one of the perspectives of the “Seven Sisters”. Perhaps there is an alien astronomer studying the star our planet is orbiting right now. It’s interesting to think about!

“Cosmos: Spectrum of Dust” represents the Helix Nebula, inspired by images captured from the Hubble telescope and others. It shows colorful dust clouds from a dying star shedding some of its atmosphere before eventually retiring as a faint white dwarf star. In the actual photograph, as well as in the painting, one can see the tiny speck of the star in the center. My intent was to interpret the image rather than realistically recreate it. This painting compares the dying star to an earthly life form, such as an amoeba – all alone in its little corner of the cosmos.
Cosmos: Galactic Horizon was inspired by an amazing photograph of the Milky Way taken with a wide angle lens. Although it was an optical illusion, the galaxy seemed to curve across the horizon. To me, the image spoke of the incredible vastness of our home galaxy with more than 100 billion stars. To illustrate the variability of size and distance of the cosmos, I used starfish representing stars and sand dollars representing planets, in conjunction with shell hash (shells crushed by the action of the surf over time), and beach sand from my collections.

Cosmos: Portals – River of Time is also from the “Cosmos Portals” series. In this piece, the portals represent different views of the same portion of a galaxy, but from different references of time, either because of distance, or chronology. The composite whole is like a river that flows downstream in both space and time, depicting a connection between the two.

Many of the “Cosmos” series paintings contain a small “shooting star” or meteor (sometimes more than one). These are memorials to my partner’s son, who died tragically and prematurely a few years ago. Although I didn’t know it at the time, on the night he died, it was during the Geminid meteor shower. While my partner and I were driving home that night, we saw a prominent bright streak across the sky – a meteor. As soon as that happened we decided that it was indeed her son, saying “goodbye” and becoming one with the cosmos.
Cosmos: Galaxy Rising I, II, III; mixed media (acrylic, oil, beach sand, diamond dust, meteorite dust), 30”H x 40”V each

Cosmos: Galaxy Rising is a triptych that was inspired by a scene from Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey. It showed a view from a distant planet in a large galaxy, slowly rising over the planet’s horizon into the night sky. This amazing vision made me ponder about a time in the very distant future when the Andromeda galaxy will be that large in our night sky, as it approaches the Milky Way (in about 2 billion years). This painting is a playful way to envision a trio of galaxies. There is also a small “memorial” shooting star in each panel.

Cosmos: Voyager I Captures Pale Blue Dot honors Carl Sagan’s concept of the Pale Blue Dot – our tiny planet shown against the vastness of space. On February 14, 1990, Sagan persuaded NASA to point the Voyager I space probe back toward Earth to take a photo, from nearly 4 billion miles away. At that point, Voyager I was on its way out of the solar system. The beams in the image are bands of sunlight scattered by the camera’s optics, in which the single pixel of the Earth just happened to appear to pass through – or as Sagan put it, “... a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.”

In this painting, the Earth is represented by a 4.6 billion-year old actual meteorite fragment painted a pale light blue.

Carl Sagan communicated the deeper meaning of this image in his 1994 book Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space. A beautiful three paragraph passage describes this image in hauntingly poetic terms, culminating in the following statements:

“There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”

Cosmos: Quantum Ribbon of Time I, II, III; mixed media (acrylic, beach sand, diamond dust, meteorite dust), 24”H x 24”V each

Cosmos: Quantum Ribbon of Time is an exploration of what time might look like if we could see it – and how it connects everything together, perhaps even in other dimensions. The three separate panels are connected visually by the energy bolt of time as it passes through and spreads outward to infinity. Small dots of color in yellow, red, blue, and white, represent various stars and their respective color temperatures.
Another subset of the “Cosmos” paintings is the “Planetary” series, based on telescopic and space probe imagery, including the surface of the planets, dwarf planets, and moons in our solar system. One of my first explorations in this series was about Mars, primarily because new discoveries about this planet were very much in the news, including liquid water.

Cosmos: Mars Needs Humans includes splashes of blue, representing liquid water. It also includes soil and pebbles from the red rock canyon areas of Utah, as well as meteorite dust and an actual meteorite fragment. The type of meteorite fragments used in my artwork usually come from the asteroid belt, a region between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. The fragments have not changed in composition since the formation of the solar system 4.5 billion years ago.

When I saw the remarkable photographs coming from NASA’s New Horizons space probe to Pluto in 2015, I knew I had to create a painting from this new imagery. Thus, Cosmos: Loving Pluto was created. There was something special about the terrain of this celestial body – once considered the ninth planet in our solar system – and then demoted to “dwarf” planet status.

It was hard to miss the apparent “heart shaped” whitish plain that covers a major part of its surface. Although I do not usually paint human-made objects or symbols, since this was an integral part of a natural object, I made an exception. While not making it too obvious, it needed to be as prominent as it appeared on the surface of Pluto. The colors and textures merge into the composition as an abstract composition.

As for the title, Loving Pluto, this celestial body has captured the hearts of many fans of astronomy over the years, and it seemed fitting – given the new appreciation they would have today, because we now know what this dwarf planet looks like.
"Visions of the Cosmos: Astronomy-inspired artwork of E. Lee Wilson, Jr." was held in the art gallery of the Eastern Florida State College Planetarium & Observatory from February 17 to June 11, 2016.

Located on the Cocoa Campus of Eastern Florida State College, the Planetarium & Observatory is a beacon in the community and is recognized as one of the finest planetariums in the country with an innovative history of ground-breaking technological advances.

Since 1975, the planetarium has served students of the College and Brevard County Schools, plus community groups, and members of the general public with informal educational experiences. The planetarium’s mission is to stimulate students’ minds as well as their imaginations, inspiring further education and pursuit of careers in science.

About the Artist

The paintings of E. Lee Wilson, Jr. have been featured in solo and group exhibitions in galleries and cultural centers, including Art Miami Spectrum, (represented by HU Gallery of Indian River City, Florida); The Sweet Art Gallery in Naples, Florida; Romancing the Frame gallery in Brentwood, Tennessee; Eastern Florida State Planetarium in Cocoa, Florida; Lexus of Melbourne, Florida; and the Melbourne International Airport. In addition, his work is in numerous private and corporate collections, including those of the Boca Grande Resort in Boca Grande, Florida and the Clothing Optional Home Network in Phoenix, Arizona.

E. Lee Wilson, Jr.
P.O. Box 150245, Nashville, TN 37215

Phone: 615-347-9641
Email: eleewilsonjr@gmail.com
Website: eleewilsonjr.com
Facebook: facebook.com/eleewilsonjr

All artwork is copyrighted by E. Lee Wilson, Jr. and au Naturale Organic Images, LLC. All rights reserved.