

# Artist Origin Story: Jeffery Cornwell

By [Marty Fugate](#), Herald-Tribune / Monday, August 22, 2016

*[Jeffery Cornwell](#) is not a tortured soul. His paintings explore the interface of sky and land in places where humanity hasn't ruined the picture. His work has a buoyant sense of color and creates a liberating feeling of open space. A primitive part of your mind thinks you might fall into them if you're not careful. Cornwell shares the lessons of his not-so-primitive mind with young art students at Booker High School's [Visual and Performing Arts program](#). He forms common cause with other working artists as a member of the [SARTO](#) artists collective. He was happy to share a few lessons with us.*

## **What was your first primal memory of creating art?**

You mean back when I was a caveman?

## **Yeah. I imagine trying to get the Mastodon to pose was hard. Seriously ... do you remember your first childhood art experience?**

Well that's going pretty far back. Carving and playing in clay is probably my earlier memory. As I got older, I'd draw or paint occasionally. I dabbled, maybe a few times a week. But it wasn't a compulsion at first. As a teenager, making art turned became more of a daily habit, but it was still pretty casual. During my last year of high school, it finally dawned on me that I had hidden talent. I was interested in art and I took a few classes. I hung out with other kids who created art and they encouraged me to keep going. The next thing I knew, I graduated. The question loomed: *What do you want to be when you grow up?* Most of the career choices weren't exciting to me — *anthropologist? Accountant?* I knew I had a natural disposition for art and I enjoyed making it. So, I enrolled at the Ringling School of Art. I was basically a blank slate at the time. I had very little understanding of art history and had very primitive technique. I had no idea of what being an artist was all about. But I knew it gave me joy, so that's the career direction I went.

## **When did art-making really catch fire for you?**

That happened in my first year at Ringling, in the late 1970s. I had an instructor who spoke very little — William Hartman. His son still runs the William Hartman Gallery on Palm Avenue. He was the kind of instructor you really listened to. He threw out compliments rarely; and his advice was always like a laser beam. If he had a correction to make, he'd use his pipe as a pointer — you could actually smoke in the classrooms at the time. So, I was working on this one figure. The instructor came around and stopped and just stood there looking at my work. I thought: *Uh-oh. He's going to tell me what I'm doing wrong.* But all he did was tap my paper and say, "I can see you really got into it. Good job." That's all he said— and it blew my mind. That's when it hit me: *Wow. I'm in the right place. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing.* It was an awakening. Before that, I'd kind of drifted into making art. After that, I took it very seriously.

## **All thanks to William Hartman?**

Well, thanks to him and many other Ringling professors. The fine arts core curriculum was very

old school when I went there. The message was: You've got to really work; you've got to really draw; you've got to really observe; you've got to really keep working. That determination stayed with me after I left Ringling. I kept working on my own and polished my style. I apprenticed with Toro Yamamoto, and he really encouraged my intuitive expression. Freelance illustration also drilled a work ethic in my head. So, life and school had many lessons for me. The art I create distills those lessons.

**And the students of your 10th grade visual arts class have evidently paid attention to your lessons. I understand their work is consistently selected for the [Embracing Our Differences](#) annual outdoor art exhibit. How does it feel?**

It feels great. Seeing their hard work pay off is rewarding for me as a teacher and an artist. The exhibit gave my students an opportunity to apply themselves as artists in a larger dynamic outside the classroom and use the power of art to raise their voices on a real life problem. Being able to give my students an assignment like this is practical application at it's finest.

**Your work combines a sense of atmospheric space with an amazing hyper-realism. Did you start off with that level of accuracy, or evolve into it?**

That's a hard question to answer. When I got out of Ringling I was more into drawing — I've always loved to draw. In my early career, I kept my drawings and my paintings in separate categories. I explored abstractions and colors in my paintings. My drawings were observational and representational. Basically, I kept colors in the realm of the paintbrush and representation in the realm of the pencil. But the two approaches slowly converged.

**You had two pots on different burners. Then you poured them together.**

Pretty much. It wasn't deliberate. I was working on a series of color drawings. I realized I was dealing with space and atmosphere here, too. Drawing is just painting with a pencil. Painting is drawing with a brush. The two approaches naturally fused together. My painting became more realistic — but not in the sense of: *Here's this object directly in front of me*. I was dealing with space and atmosphere, and not breaking things up so much with the hierarchy of figure and ground.

**You're not painting one thing. You're painting the whole thing — the gestalt.**

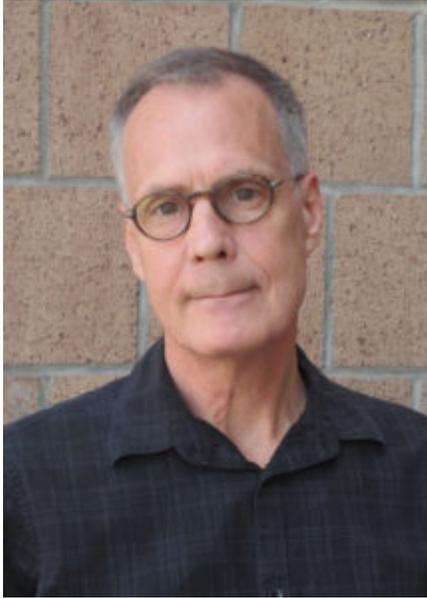
There's little more to it, but yeah.

**What's your process?**

I'm very intuitive. My paintings flow out of what I'm trying to evoke color and space-wise. I draw a lot on site. I'll also take photos for reference — but I never copy a photo.

**No projector.**

No, just reference. Photography gives me a sense of the colors of a certain time of day or the quality of a particular kind of landscape. And if I'm painting an evening scene, I'll actually go out and walk around in the twilight and observe — file the information away in my brain. It's a whole process.



Jeffrey Cornwell

**Do you like painting?**

I love painting. And I really enjoy being an artist.

**Not the suffering variety?**

No. I went through my whole black period. Once is enough. Now, I'm in my red-orange-yellow-green-blue-indigo-violet period. I paint what I paint, and I love it.



## **Marty Fugate**

Marty Fugate is an area-based critic, screenwriter, science fiction writer, humorist and cartoonist. He was the co-editor / co-publisher of "The Sarasota Arts Review" from 1989 to 2000 and the A&E editor and theater and visual art critic and staff cartoonist for the Observer Group newspapers from 2001 to 2007. He now writes about theater, visual art and architecture for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.