

# Francis on quest for life's symbolism

**By Jerry Cullum**

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From one perspective, Mississippi artist Ke Francis is exploring a sort of Neo-southern mythology. From another, he's searching for universal symbols in an era that's been singularly short on them.

"I am not interested in producing regional art," he writes about the crowded imagery in his large, brilliantly colored assemblage-canvases, "but in producing an art that speaks to much broader human concerns (i.e., fear, death, joy, humor, reconstruction, and personal myth)."

"Reconstruction" is meant literally on one level. His "Tornado" series of paintings is about chaos and destruction; his "Reconstruction is about rebuilding on physical and psychological levels. Several paintings include attached cutout images of circular saw blades and carpenters' saws. Some of the circular saw blades have traditional symbols of cosmic reconciliation painted on them, such as the bisected circle of the Oriental Yin-Yang image or the Greek image of the snake swallowing its tail.

Literal tools, then, serve as metaphors for spiritual issues."Garden#1", a triptych shaped more or less like a Gothic altarpiece painting, presents an image familiar to many Southern gardeners: a snake bloodily chopped in two, lying among lush greenery. A hoe, presumably the implement of the snake's destruction, is

attached to the left-hand side of this painting in a position of honor, like a laborer's version of the family sword. Despite the familiarity of the scene, thoughts of the snake in the Garden of Eden. seem almost inescapable.

Does work overcome evil in Mr. Francis' personal mythology? He writes, "I used to believe that Beulah Land was coming. IT IS HERE. Beulah Land is a reality given to me by the work I pursue."

Some viewers may prefer to stay with Mr. Francis' more literal looking sculptures, such as "Jug Line Boat"-whimsical little figures of a boat and oar with fish hanging on a line. But fishing is also work, and presumably part of Beulah Land; do those fish have meaning we don't yet suspect.

We don't know, frankly, and the uncertainty is what captivates in this sometimes wild and wooly imagery. This is risky, sometimes messy-looking artwork, exuberantly down-home and soaringly metaphysical in the same set of images.

This exhibition won't appeal to everyone. Skeptical viewers have every right to remain unconvinced by this sprawling search for collective symbols of our spiritual and physical condition. But nearly everyone will have to admire its energy and Mr. Francis' willingness to take chances on his personal quest for larger human meanings.