

Painting: © Lou Bermingham

Diamond Head, 95 in. x 74 in., 2011

# Painter of Dreams

Paintings © Lou Bermingham



*Sapphire Aftershock*, 79 in. x 112 in., 2011

## Abstract artist Lou Bermingham reaches back 30,000 years for inspiration

By Robin Shepherd

Capitola resident Lou Bermingham is an accomplished artist whose work has been featured at Santa Clara's Triton Museum of Art and acquired by patrons around the world. When he's not in his studio, Bermingham shares his passion for art with the students of San Jose's Independence High School. He also holds a black belt in Aikido, having trained with sensei's Jack Wada, Robert Nadeau, and Linda Holiday before founding Aikido of Los Gatos where he taught for 25 years before turning his full attention to fine art.

With every brush stroke on the canvas, Bermingham skillfully blends these aspects of his life into a body of work that quietly defies art world attempts to categorize. Curators might introduce Bermingham as an abstractionist, but quickly depart from there, preferring to describe his work using such terms as transcendent, cosmic, cerebral, transformational, primal, and spiritual.

How many of us carry our dreams into our work? Bermingham does.

"I have dreams filled with colors, shapes, symbols, and animals. I keep a dream journal, and I often bring these elements into my art. They are present within the layers of paint on canvas, there to be revealed to the viewer over time."

How many of us integrate our physical and spiritual selves into our work? Bermingham does.

He has a studio in Capitola and a larger industrial warehouse studio in Campbell. Each time he enters one of his studios, Bermingham follows a ritual.

"There's a process I follow before I pick up my paintbrush. I do a breathing meditation, followed by Aikido movements using a wooden sword, or bokken, or a wooden staff known as a bo. This process helps me to center myself and enter into a deeper state of being where I'm able to put aside the worldly affairs of the day—people to see, things to be done.

I once painted without going through my process, and I ruined one of my paintings. I couldn't even salvage it—and normally I can—but I hadn't gone through the process. It's about getting centered and leaving distractions behind, so the creative energy can flow."

Bermingham's art is inspired by many sources, including artists and art movements. He runs through his mental list: American artists Joan Mitchell and Mark Rothko; French artists Yves Klein and Paul Gauguin; German artists Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polke. Then he goes big picture: Egyptian and Asian art,



Painting © Lou Bermingham

*When the River was the World*, 72 in. x 48 in., 2015

French Nouveau Realism, and Paleolithic art.

Among his favorite inspirations... natural imagery Bermingham discovered while caving. Some of his most notable influences are the ancient cave paintings in Lascaux and Pech-Merle, France as well as Altamira, Spain. He has visited some of these caves, which are covered with symbols and images of bison and other animals thought to have been painted 15,000 to 30,000 years ago.

"Through art we can connect back through history to our deepest primal roots. I'm always reworking symbols—circles, spirals, squares—but not in obvious ways. I relate it to my experience of Aikido and to Asian art."

For 16 years, Bermingham has been teaching art to high school students at San Jose's Independence High School. He works with over 160 students a day, five days a week, encouraging them to explore a wide variety of artistic styles and media. His students explore drawing, painting, ceramics, and glass as well as other media.

"In a world where youth lose their creative inhibition all too soon, I believe and try to convey to my students that "every human being is an artist, and art is one of the most fundamental ways of expressing the human experience beyond the social, political, and economic boundaries that tend to separate

us from one another."

"My goal is to have students experience a broad range of art beyond what they know such as graffiti, anime, and pop culture icons. They work in charcoal, paint, clay, glass and papier mâché. Work in these media takes on a measure of tangibility and substance that can be very empowering for the students."

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"My artistic/educational philosophy is not based on my students becoming professional artists—but rather their discovery of their innate creativity through art. The realization of creativity has another wonderful by-product. It helps people solve problems, new technologies are born, and humanity moves forward positively."

Bermingham helped set up the first of what has become an annual tradition of having a student art exhibition and reception at the high school. "It's important to showcase young artists' work to encourage the artistic tradition and quest for deeper meaning in

life."

He also tells his students that with any art form, they've got to put in the time. "I have made it my habit to show up at my studio and work. I may not always feel ready, or inspired, but I believe in letting the muse flow through me. The discipline of martial arts has been fundamental to me in this regard."

Bermingham has been invited to show his latest work at special exhibits including the Triton Museum's 50th anniversary celebration in May 2015. Currently he is bringing his experience from having lived in Egypt into a series of paintings slated for another Triton show.

"I am intrigued by Egyptian characters like Isis and Osiris and their stories captured in hieroglyphics," said Bermingham.

According to Preston Metcalfe, Chief Curator at the Triton, "Bermingham transcends propaganda and didacticism, enticement, and decoration. His art springs from that inner well of symbol and metaphor to which we all have access but from which only few of us draw."

This year his work was also featured in a solo exhibit at the Sakata Karo Gallery in Sacramento where his long-time mentor, Robert Jean Ray, is curator. According to Ray, "It is a revelation to encounter art that is as stimulating and inspirational as the work of Lou Berm-

ingham. Lou pays homage to mid-twentieth century abstract expressionism and channels the spirit of Japanese aesthetics. He reaches back into art's history and strides forward. His intuitive and soulful approach to the creative process will assure his standing as an artist of historic merit."

Bermingham always has a number of projects in various stages. "I'm more comfortable now, just exploring as I work and letting the painting develop without necessarily knowing what specific direction I want it to go from the first brushstroke." 🎨

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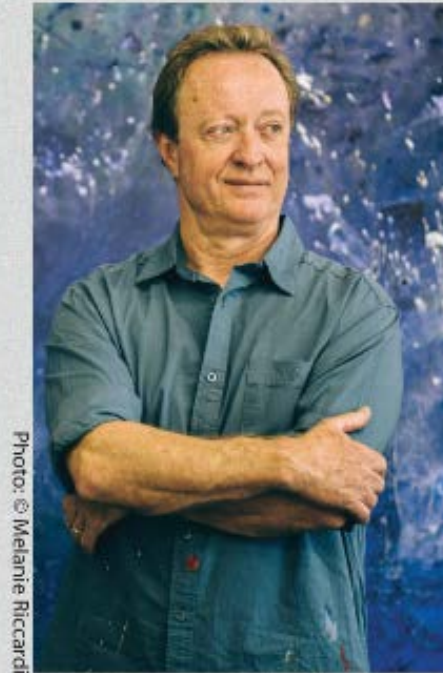


Photo: © Melanie Riccardi

(Above) Artist Lou Bermingham stands before his painting *Sapphire Aftershock*.