Ashland painter Jerry Simon gestures towards "Political Process," one of his large-scale, mixed media abstracts included in his exhibit, "The Landscape Reconstructed." Simon began his work as an expressionist after moving to the Rogue Valley several years ago from Southern California.

Mail Tribune / Jamie Lusch

Outside the rectangle

Curves and protrusions set the shapes of Jerry Simon's abstract artworks

When you see conventional painting it's as if the frame were a window. Especially if the painting is a landscape.

Jerry Simon wanted to paint outside the rectangle. Which is why the artworks in his new exhibit at the Rogue Gallery and Art Center are called "The Landscape Reconstructed."

Simon uses specially built surfaces on which to create abstract landscapes and mixed-media works that break the four walls that have always surrounded most paintings. His images protrude out the paintings' sides like colorful appendages, hang like afterthoughts, thrust out like weird geological formations.

By BILL VARBLE
Mail Tribune

"Nothing is static," Simon says.

Consider "Political Process," a nearly 7-foot-wide mixed media work in which fur and feathers join acrylics and collage with images of eagles, lions and crowds at what appear to be political rallies. Way at the bottom is a bunch of money. The eagles and lions are flying high, but guess who's roadkill.

In this and other works, the central image determines the shape of the work, not vice-versa. The top is a curve, a sawed-off protrusion rises at an angle to the right, and the left side sticks out like a new wing added to a building.

"I've been thinking about doing this for about 30 years," Simon says.

Now 77, he moved to Ashland from Marin County, Calif., several years ago after a career in graphic design. He says living in Oregon caused him to see the landscape differently — "with the low sun and different angles." Hence, the fracturing of space to offer up different perspectives.

"In landscape, there's the question of what you do with the sky?" he says. "All that negative space. But we fly in planes now." The idea of looking from above gives you a different perspective.

IF YOU GO

What: "The Landscape Reconstructed"

When: Through Saturday, June 28

Where: The Rogue Gallery & Art Center, 40 S. Bartlett St., Medford

Call: 772-8118

"Magma Opus" is an energetic mixed-media work, the reds and oranges of which suggest not metaphorical lava but the hot kind. It's flowing right out that imaginary rectangle in three different places.

Simon says he likes to give abstract artworks names that are clues to their themes. This can be tantalizing in small works such as "The Meadow" and "Pear Orchard Blizzard," abstract things that bear no obvious relation to their literal themes.

Simon works mainly in acrylic paints, to which he adds pastels, inks and colored pencil as well as found objects and bits of stuff from nature.

A look at the back of one of his canvases reveals the method behind his madness. Far from being simple frames, Simon's surfaces are constructed like a "flat" stage set, each one custom-shaped to its subject. One has curved wooden frames held in place by strut-like little "studs." A rounded work is built like an old wagon wheel with spokes.

Simon formulates a concept, makes sketches, then starts constructing a frame of bent Masonite. Sometimes he cuts through the painting so the wall it's hanging on becomes a sort of artistic ground.

Several famous artists experimented with "shaped canvas" in the 1960s, including Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Other shaped canvas painters became sculptors. But Simon says his fractured landscapes were inspired more by the dynamism of nature, and by an eagle-eye view of Earth with its patterns of geology and topography.

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