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Ecological awareness with paint and a brush

BY JAMES DELLAFIORA

West Village artist Norman Magnusson sees a lot of the human condition in the way we treat our surroundings.

One painting in his new show, "Travelogue," at the Bridgewater Lustberg/Gallery, 560 Broadway, entitled "Deer Fence," contrasts the differences between deer living in the wild, and deer living in captivity. Magnusson said his paintings symbolize the damage man inflicts on the natural environment, and on himself.

"A few years ago I fell into doing paintings of animals," he said. "Gradually I started to see themes in my paintings repeat themselves -- I saw the same difficulties that we experience as humans. Now I primarily try to echo the human condition and also paint something that has an ecological feel to it."

Magnusson, a Cincinnati native, studied English and Economics at Southern Methodist University. A self-taught artist, he began painting back in 1983, when he was new to Manhattan and working as a copywriter for an advertising company. He was struggling and looking for inexpensive entertainment.

"There was nothing to do and painting was cheap, so my roommate said 'hey, let's paint!'," Magnusson said. "We ended up decorating our apartment with the paintings we did, which were usually copies of paintings we really liked. We would decorate the apartment with paintings and I started to think how sweet it would be to do that full time."

Magnusson said everything he learned about painting was the result of trial and error. He experimented with different styles and subjects until he found his own rhythm.

"In the beginning it wasn't as creative as it is now," Magnusson said. "Eventually I started doing my own paintings, and I picked up some things from other artists. I found that with enough patience I could make what was in my head happen on the canvass."

"I was very insecure for a long time. Eventually, as I did more shows, I've gotten

more and more feedback from different people, and with that came the confidence to keep going."

His new show opens Feb. 13 and spotlights more than a dozen works that were inspired by an extended trip he and companion Andrea Moss took through New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Fiji and the Cook Islands. He noticed the different people and cultures of the region, but he was particularly impressed by the natural images they encountered,

particularly the images of ecological injustice and devastation.

Magnusson's seven-month journey around the Pacific was not his first trip outside the states. He worked for his advertising company in England during 1989, and eventually lived in France from 1992 to 1993.

"I guess that was when the desire really took off," he said of his time in Europe. "I sort of got the bug for travelling and seeing new places." For his next trip, Magnusson plans to focus on themes more specific to America, and maybe head west. He said his travels have made him aware, and have given his art a meaning.

"It's hard, living in the city, to be ecologically aware," he said. "We separate garbage and recycle things, but we don't see the direct impact we have on nature. Living in New Zealand for three months sharpened my desire to have an ecological message. It started of being an aesthetic decision."

Even the frames of his paintings add to the environmental awareness Magnusson strives for. His "Deer Fence," for example, uses a cross-section slice of a tree trunk as the mounting for the painting of a free deer and a trapped deer. Some other paintings use slabs of discarded wood or crates for their framework.

"I figured it would look cool and then it worked in as a thematic decision," he said.

