Something extra in her terrestrials

Leslie Neumann's landscapes evoke other-earthly mysteries with unexpected color and abstraction.

Leslie Neumann, *At Home*, oil and encaustic on panel.

Images from Galleries at Salt Creek

Leslie Neumann, *Garden of Unearthly Delights*, oil and encaustic on panel.

BY LENNIE BENNETT • *Times Art Critic* ST. PETERSBURG

Hard to say whether Leslie Neumann's subject matter serves her medium or the medium serves the subject. Which is to say they work very well in partnership. She is essentially a landscape artist and paints using oil and encaustic, a hot wax method that creates texture and depth. The wax also provides a luminous quality that takes the works to a mystical, mysterious level. • Several dozen of them are on display at Galleries at Salt Creek and in them we see that "landscape" is a loosely applied word, really just a starting point for Neumann, who often ventures beyond the terrestrial into the heavens for inspiration. And in so doing, often distills images to the point of abstraction. • Those are my favorites. *Roar*, for example, is an elegant interplay of light and dark in which ovoid shapes line up in increasing size, suggesting their movement toward the foreground. Then, wham. The largest intersects with a linear mass. It's like sound, visualized, the collision of waves meeting a receptor.

Ancient Beginnings is a mixed metaphor of sorts, a brown terrain and a sky spouting explosive jets of fire and light. A small planetary orb is painted a lovely, gentle blue that seems to sprinkle healing water — swaths of the same blue beneath it — on the parched earth. Another orb hovers in the foreground, this one in shades of glowing bronze. It's an odd painting. The orbs, at first look, distract. But look longer and you see that they provide substance and solidity to a gauzy, amorphous scene and, like Neumann's "sound" paintings, suggest a continuum. I would have loved that orb all by itself.

Neumann also deploys color, strong jolts of it used (with abandon in some cases) in her "garden" paintings. *Garden of Unearthly Delights* pictures a body of turquoise water with knobby plants in the shape of cypress knees emerging from it, though the plants are green, not brown. The sky is a blend of pastels and a fireball glow rolls across it like a vaporized sun. The painting's colors are muted by the encaustic so the result is sensuous, not strident. Paintings such as *Ancient Beginnings* and *Golden Dawn*, with its Turner-esque sky, invoke violent evolution. The garden paintings are more the mythical paradise of gentle rhythms.

I guessed the title of *Lovers* before reading it on the wall label, and I'm not showing off in saying that. It's just an obvious painting, two leaves cleaving to each other as they float in the air. Its pendant (an art term meaning a pair of works meant to hang together) seems to be *Spooners*, another pair of leaves. They're greener and not as closely attached, younger and in the getting-to-know-you stage. They're sweet paintings, pretty to look at, but not in the same league as many other works in the show.

Leslie Neumann, *Golden Dawn*, oil and encaustic on panel.

Still they, like all Neumann's work, are related to one's sense of place. Most of the collection suggests journey rather than destination and the real presence of movement to convey time's passing. The encaustic is best when used as a soft landing place on the surface; she scratches and digs beneath it to reveal underpainting in oil, creating complex textural effects. It's less compelling when used to transmit messages as a form of spiritual texting. Sometimes I wish for less proselytizing. But her gift for color is undeniable. You can get lost in her imagined lands.

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Leslie Neumann: Cosmic Connections

The exhibition is at the Galleries at Salt Creek, 1600 Fourth St. S, St. Petersburg, through April 18. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. (727) 894-2653. Please note: Occasionally, the gallery manager is not there during posted hours so call in advance to make sure it will be open for your visit.