



"Bayou Bartholomew, Arkansas," acrylic on canvas, 1990, by Dwight Drennan (Special to the Democrat-Gazette)

## Vision of BEAUTY



"House of the Blue Hydrangeas," acrylic on canvas, 1990, by Dwight Drennan (Special to the Democrat-Gazette)

Friends of late artist preserve, share his work and story

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**B**enny Turner was in the eighth grade when he met Dwight Drennan at Harmony Grove School in Saline County. Drennan was a senior, but despite the age difference, the pair hit it off. They would hang out in the mornings before classes to discuss music, politics, what was going on at the school, mutual friends, etc.

"He was very popular, not just in his class but the entire school," says Turner, 70, from his home in New York. "He was a really friendly, fun guy."

One of his strongest memories from those days was of Drennan's creativity.

"He was constantly drawing," Turner says. "We'd be in study hall talking, and he was always drawing and sketching. That's just what he did."

Drennan studied political science and history at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, but also took art courses. The works he

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Artist Dwight "Kuimeaux" Drennan died July 28, 2022, at the age of 72. His friends and family have created The Kuimeaux Project, a website that tells Drennan's story and features galleries of his works. At right, Drennan works on "Where the Ouachita Begins." (Special to the Democrat-Gazette)





"Flooded Rice Field Near Bayou LaGrue, Arkansas," acrylic on canvas, 2008, by Dwight Drennan (Special to the Democrat-Gazette)



## Drennan

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would go on to make included dreamy, vibrant paintings of Louisiana and Arkansas Delta landscapes as well as political cartoons and drawings of cityscapes and buildings.

Turner and Drennan lost touch briefly after Drennan graduated, but reconnected when Turner moved to Little Rock for college. Their friendship remained strong, even when they were living in different parts of the country.

"There was never a month that went by when we didn't talk on the phone to each other," Turner says.

For years Drennan, who was known as Kuimeaux ("KEY-mo"), suffered from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. He died on July 28, 2022, at 72, leaving behind a trove of paintings, drawings and sketches. Not long after Drennan's passing, Turner teamed up with Drennan's friends Ed Eaves, Melissa Woods, Chris Maxwell and Sonny Gault, along with Drennan's sister, Linda McInturff, to create The Kuimeaux Project ([kuimeauxart.com/the-kuimeaux-project](http://kuimeauxart.com/the-kuimeaux-project)), a website dedicated to preserving and sharing his artworks and story.

Maxwell posted the following on Facebook after Drennan's passing:

"I wish everyone could've met Dwight 'Kuimeaux' Drennan. If you're lucky, you may have met someone like him. The kind of person you meet in life and remember forever. They come to your mind even after years apart like a sense memory and give you comfort or hope that maybe all this is worth it after all. Part Louisiana and part Arkansas, 100% Southern gentleman ... Thanks, Kuimeaux, for leaving behind your vision of beauty."

With the website, those of us who never knew Drennan can now appreciate his unique art and learn about his life.

★★★

Drennan was born in Little Rock on Sept. 21, 1950. His family moved to Haskell in Saline County in 1965. He earned his degree in political science with a minor in history from UALR. By his senior year, however, he'd become enamored of art and after graduation decided to become an artist, according to his biography at the project's website.

He moved to Monroe, La.,



"Delta Kings and Queens" is an example of Dwight Drennan's envelope art. (Special to the Democrat-Gazette)

in the mid-'70s and lived near Bayou DeSiard for a decade (Louisiana is also where he earned the nickname Kuimeaux). He supported himself by working at Johnny's Pizza House, where his recipe for sweet tea proved popular with customers, and cultivated a jungle-like garden in his yard, something he would replicate at other places he lived. It was while in Monroe that Drennan began creating imaginative, vivid paintings of Southern landscapes and his gardens.

His time in Monroe ended after a fire in 1984 destroyed his home and many of his artworks. Two of his dogs were killed by the blaze, which Drennan narrowly escaped. He moved back to Little Rock to be closer to family, and eventually took a job as caretaker at an estate on Bearskin Lake near Scott.

In the only Artist's Statement Drennan was known to have written, he reflected on the impact the area had on him. "I live on a cypress-fringed old river lake in the Arkansas Delta southeast of Little Rock. The luxuriant flora, the big sky over flat, fertile fields, the bayous, the swamps and great rivers have often given me inspiration for my paintings and drawings."

"I have an intense feeling for this land and its people — for example, when I stand under or touch an ancient cypress tree; when I think how very quickly Nature would reclaim this land and its waters were it not for man's interventions; or when I think of, and as I live, the human experience — both joyous and tragic

— in the Deep South. My expression of these overwhelming emotions is through art."

Drennan had to leave when the estate was sold in the early 2000s. He settled in Sherwood, where he lived until his death.

★★★

Woods became friends with Drennan when they were neighbors on Wright Avenue in Little Rock in the '80s, and bonded over their shared love of history.

"That's all we ever talked about," she says. "He was wonderful to talk to."

These days Woods lives near the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, and hanging on the mustard-colored walls of her living room are several of Drennan's paintings. She also has a few of his sketches, including one he made of the home on Wright Avenue that Woods lived in with her sisters.

Drennan, a tireless letter writer, wrote often to her, Turner and other friends and family. He would send the letters in envelopes upon which he'd drawn detailed city scenes and landscapes, and Woods produced a few of them to a visitor in May (along with his paintings, drawings and sketches, 22 examples of Drennan's envelope art are displayed at the website).

Among Drennan's paintings at Woods' home is "House of the Blue Hydrangeas," from 1990. It was given to her after Drennan passed away and depicts the partially obscured facade of a house glimpsed through a tangle of

vegetation.

In a video at the website, Drennan talks about the work, calling it a "typical Kuimeaux idea of a garden, a jungle and this kind of mysterious house," before adding, "I love that painting." He compares looking at the work to the feeling he gets when he sees art made by Henri Rousseau, the untrained French painter who was born in 1844 and who became known for his jungle fantasy pictures.

★★★

Little Rock artist Katherine Strause and former UALR curator and gallery director Brad Cushman were called upon to help curate the works featured on the website.

Drennan's paintings, Strause says in a text, "are mysterious. They have the essence of a Carroll Cloar, an artist who is grounded in his environment and the nature of this place."

Strause wasn't familiar with Drennan's work before being asked to help with the project, but now feels a kinship with him.

"I was so happy to get to know Kuimeaux and his work fairly intimately. He seems like a great friend to me now, which sort of fits with his persona."

In choosing the works for the online galleries, Cushman says, "we were really trying to hone in on the pieces in each series that really celebrated his hand and his use of color. What stood out to me was that it really was art about where he was from and the life he lived. So many times people say, 'you need to make

art about what you know.' He did that. He responded to the landscapes he lived in, the politics of the times he lived in."

Also at Woods' home is "Ed and Ina's World," an elaborate, clever, mixed-media work on paper that Drennan made in 1973 as a gift for Eaves and his wife, Ina, both natives of Benton. It's almost like a poster, with "Benton Aluminum Capital of the World" written at the bottom and various Arkansas landmarks — the Arlington Hotel, the state Capitol, Saline County Memorial Hospital and more as it goes up. At the top is a small dog, and there's even a TV camera, an acknowledgement of Eaves' career as a television photojournalist. It's one of those artworks in which a viewer can spy something new each time they see it.

"Instead of the Tower of Babel, it's the Tower of Benton," Cushman says of the whimsical piece.

★★★

Eaves attended Harmony Grove with Turner and Drennan, but didn't befriend Drennan until later, when they were living in Little Rock.

"Kuimeaux was the coolest guy I knew," he says in a statement shared by Turner. "We spent countless hours together talking about music, art, and politics — all subjects he seemed to know so much about. His take on Southern culture and the news of the day was often the subject whenever we would get together."

In 2015, Eaves and Turner began work on a documentary

of Drennan, interviewing him about his art and "all things Southern." With Eaves living in Washington and Turner in New York, however, it was difficult to get together and the project was never completed.

With the website, however, some of the footage now has a home and there are several clips of Drennan speaking about his work, like the previously mentioned "House of the Blue Hydrangeas."

Drennan's gentle voice has a sweet, Southern lilt. In a video in which he talks about his love of drawing colorful, imaginary nightspots — with names like Bubba's Ole South Club and Delta Kings and Queens, Mississippi's Most Unusual Bar — he says "that's one reason nightclubs are a good subject; there's usually nothing subtle about 'em."

★★★

While Drennan's work never found a commercial audience during his lifetime, he was accepted three times in the former Arkansas Arts Center's annual Delta Exhibition and exhibited at art fairs and festivals in Louisiana and Arkansas. He was also the subject of several solo shows, the last of which was in North Little Rock in 2006. Prints of Drennan's work are available at M2 Gallery in Little Rock, Turner says.

Despite not having made a lucrative career from his art, Drennan continued to create, something Cushman finds admirable.

"There is in some ways this sort of isolated loneliness about his biography. But he moved forward. Studio time and practice is what every artist wants and needs. He had that routine figured out, and he did it, if not for any other reason than his own gratification and joy and need to express himself."

The group behind the Kuimeaux Project is hoping to hold an exhibition of Drennan's work at some point, and Turner and Eaves have plans to finish their documentary of their beloved friend.

"This is one of the most deeply satisfying things I've ever been a part of," Turner says. "We want to honor our friend, our brother, to celebrate his life and celebrate his art. He was such a wonderful person and such a gifted artist. It's a privilege to be a part of this."