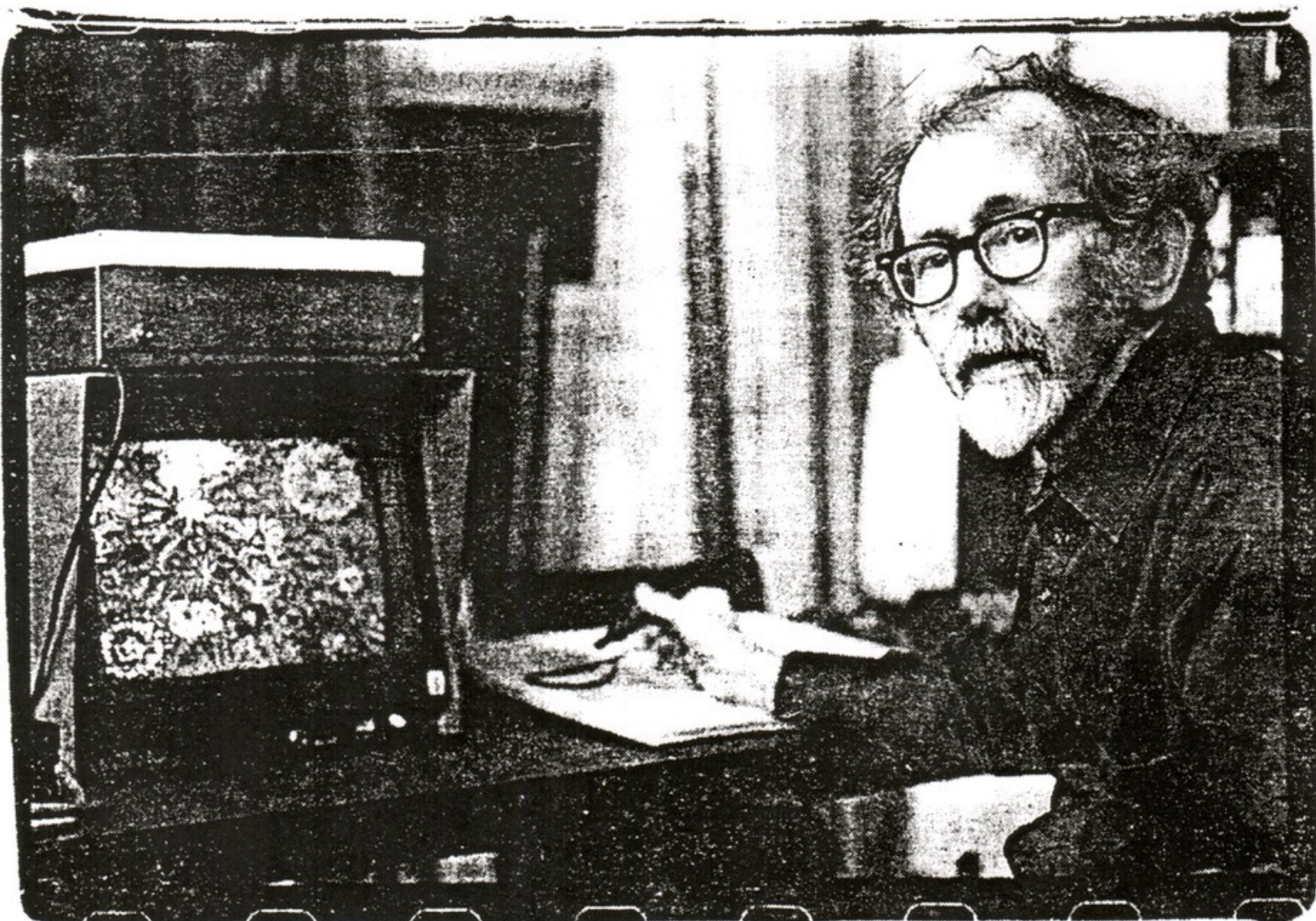


CITYPAGES

MUNZNER'S COSMOLOGY *Fallon, p.31*

I Am the Cosmos

Talking computers and the chronos with
sexagenarian artist Aribert Munzner



SEAN SMUDA

Come see my photomicroscopy?: Aribert Munzner explores the art of science

ARTS

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by Michael Fallon

“I get as much energy from the scientific community as I do from the art community.” So explains Aribert Munzner, a 68-year-old Minneapolis painter and former professor of catholic interests and scant notoriety, whose show *Works on Cosmology* recently opened at the Dolly Fiterman Gallery. “The art community in the Twin Cities has always been very quiet about this kind of work,” he says.

Comprising several dozen paintings and drawings in acrylic, casein, and ink, on paper and canvas, Munzner's work seems to reflect a long metamorphosis. There are swirling masses alongside splashes and scrapes of color that might be mistaken either for a magnified view of a petri dish or a Hubble telescope photo. One vertically oriented painting entitled “Genesis 98-3(R)” (every painting is called “Genesis,” followed by a number or date) depicts two vortices; from these surge warm tangles of mostly orange and yellow brush strokes. The artist uses various tricks to pull off this sense of movement, leading our eyes with the direction of his marks, varying the size of the marks as they recede inward or move outward, and nimbly interlacing various colors. A cold, green atmospheric color around the edge of the image adds to the overall sense of space. The highly calligraphic marks reveal Munzner's hand, creating an image that strikes a balance between the personal involvement of the artist and the scientific appearance of his figures.

Munzner's investigations into a wide range of subjects—science, philosophy, and music—have brought him into contact with the kinds of people that math-phobic artists have been avoiding for generations. In the 1970s, Munzner received a grant to

study photomicroscopy with a scientist in New York. In the early 1980s, he experimented with 3M on a series of early computer-painting prototypes. Several years ago, he traveled to Arizona to look through the powerful telescopes in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Though Munzner has been painting for more than 40 years, he remains largely unknown in the local art scene. But according to gallery owner Dolly Fiterman, the opening night of the exhibit saw fans of Munzner's peculiar aesthetic surface in some numbers. “There were scientists here and artists from all over,” she reports. “People from the Cities that I hadn't seen in years. People from different parts of the country. They were all here.... Finally, people are taking notice of Ari's work.”

Changes in direction are perhaps a central aspect of Munzner's artistic output. After discovering painting as a student at Syracuse University in the late 1940s, Munzner educated himself at the high altar of American art by hitchhiking on weekends to New York City and staying in a Village flat. He was influenced by many of the great artists working in New York at the time, particularly abstract expressionists such as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey, and William Bazotes. After graduating, he attended the progressive Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. (Munzner would himself teach and administrate at MCAD for 38 years until retiring in 1993.)

As an artist, Munzner has often been at the forefront of important movements, albeit in a quiet and studied way. In the 1950s and '60s, tired of the harsh toxicity of standard paint mediums, he began mixing pigments with water-soluble mediums just as other artists were taking an interest in this approach. A few years later, Munzner was among the first artists to use the new acrylic- and casein-based paints. Next followed the computer experiments with 3M in the 1980s.

This history of experimentation is reflected in Munzner's studio, a small Fridley warehouse space flanked on one side by a trailer park and on the other by a shop that sells paint-it-yourself

ceramic plates. In one corner of the studio, computer equipment spills out on several tables, ready to be called on for impromptu electronic jam sessions. In another, shelves of well-leafed books on astrology, microbiology, philosophy, and other subjects reach to the ceiling. And, of course, the trappings of his art are everywhere. Half-finished paintings cover the walls and shelves, and sit stacked on the floor. Brushes and jars of paint clutter the tables.

A near-obsession seems to have seized Munzner since his retirement. Munzner claims he works in his studio through most nights now, sometimes going home to sleep just a few hours in the morning, other times sacking out on a couch here (he has a refrigerator and toilet in the back for such contingencies). Energetic and fit, Munzner wears a goatee, a loose head of hair, and an even looser jacket and pair of pants, and

his face flushes with enthusiasm as he expounds on his art. He works on as many as 20 paintings at one time, adding dabs of color here and there, rearranging the studio, gradually willing a finished image out of each painting.

Munzner points to one painting in the middle of a pile, a bright constellation of flower bursts, and says he has been working on it since 1969. "It's just about finished," he exclaims. On another shelf, seven paintings rest side by side, each a near-replica of the others. "I think of them as alternate takes of the same track," he says of the canvases, which are filled with seaweed-shaped glyphs. "I have an album by Charlie Parker that is 25 takes of the same tune, with only subtle differences of tone and color to distinguish them... These paintings are like that. I've been

working on them for more than six years."

In his work, Munzner relies on jazzy intuition and improvisation in one moment and on scientific logic and structure in the next. This adds depth and charm to his paintings, yet it also makes them difficult to understand. As Munzner riffs on the paradoxical nature of ontogeny and ontology, cosmogeny and cosmology, inner and outer space, the *kairos* and the *chronos*, the artist's energy seems to swell while the listener's begins to flag.

"I consider what I do a dance," he says at one point, demonstrating by stepping agilely and making a few imaginary swipes with his brush hand at the painting that sits on the table. "I am always listening to music as I work, and I'm caught up in the moment, always moving. I dance around the painting. Literally, as I paint I make believe I'm a particle, or galaxy, moving through the image. After all, we are all in constant motion

on both a micro- and macroscopic level. I look to work with a direct language in the dance of marks, movement, and color... I don't try to create images as I paint. The images just emerge."

We sift through the different periods of his career, all the different experiments, examining drawings as small as 2 inches in width and computer-generated paintings as large as houses. Eventually we go back outside, and are buffeted by the rush of the highway.

"I haven't wanted to pursue an art career before now. I've had small shows here and there, at the Walker and so on. But I think honestly I am just beginning." His face takes on a faraway look, then he recovers in an instant and smiles. "At this point, everything is completely wide open." **CP**

Aribert Munzner's current exhibition at the Dolly Fiterman Gallery, Works on Cosmology, continues through October; 623-3300.