Art imitates art: Series honors family

By Steve Bennett
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San Antonio’s Franco Mondini-Ruiz is transforming a large canvas into an homage to “bluebonnet painter” Julian Onderdonk. Photo: Steve Bennett, San Antonio Express-News / SA

In cool contemporary-art circles, bluebonnet paintings are excoriated as the work of weekend hacks.

But San Antonio artist Franco Mondini-Ruiz, who is the epitome of cool with his mixture of high concept and lowbrow, turns that conceit on its head with his latest series of works, on view at the Institute of Texan Cultures through Aug. 31.

"Almost an Onderdonk," the latest exhibition in curator Arturo Almeida’s Texas Contemporary Artists Series, pays tribute to the first family of Texas painting, specifically Julian Onderdonk, the early-19th-century Impressionist known as the "Bluebonnet Painter."

Onderdonk, whose work hung in the Oval Office during the presidency of George W. Bush, has become largely misunderstood as a sort of Thomas Kinkade painter of “prettiness.”

But, as his sister, artist Eleanor Onderdonk, put it: "In many of his canvases, Julian uses dramatic contrast - blasts of strong volume, with deep rolling orchestration, far removed from
any 'prettness' which is ascribed by the undiscriminating to my brother's work."

A discriminating artist, Mondini-Ruiz gets it.

His four landscapes in "Almost an Onderdonk" - which include an homage to Porfirio Salinas (another president's - LBJ's - favorite artist) - are respectful of the man who said, "San Antonio offers an inexhaustible field for the artist."

Mondini-Ruiz was inspired by a 2008 book, "Julian Onderdonk: American Impressionist" (Dallas Museum of Art Publications). He picked up the lavishly illustrated coffee-table volume a couple of years ago in the Witte Museum gift shop while working on what will be his second book, "Postcards from Home: A Painter's History of San Antonio," the follow-up to 2005's "High Pink: Tex-Mex Fairy Tales."

"You may be a bit jaded, just from the context, but I picked up this book, and there are some very nice reproductions in there," Mondini-Ruiz said recently. "I started to appreciate how beautiful the paintings were. Some are very sweeping, and they have a nice patina to them. About a year later - that's how the process works - these paintings began to bubble out."

Onderdonk took his easel straight to the source by painting plein-air, a French term meaning "in the open air," a practice he learned from his mentor, the American master William Merritt Chase. Mondini-Ruiz initially fretted over how to approach the work.

"How do you even go about starting a bluebonnet painting?" asks the artist, who grew up in the Hill Country, home of bluebonnets and wildflowers. "I thought it would be outside my reach, that it would be this very formal, very Victorian technique that would take me a long time to learn."

An instinctual painter, Mondini-Ruiz quit worrying and got to work.

"My paintings are kind of sculptural and willful," the 51-year-old artist says. "I don't know proper techniques of painting. I will a painting. I'll use my fingernails if I have to. And I do."

Using a big house-painting brush, Mondini-Ruiz layers at least three colors on the canvas - in the case of the monumental "Love That Landscape," white, orangey red and baby blue - before grounding it in greenish black and finger-smudging clouds in white. Then, he takes a big, soaking-wet brush, dips it into blobs of color - red, blue, green, yellow - squirted on a paper plate and flicks droplets onto the canvas. Voilà! Wildflowers.

"I do it my way, and these paintings practically paint themselves," says the former attorney who turned to art "because I had to create something meaningful, something beautiful, something interesting."

He first gained notice in the mid-'90s with "Infinito Botanica," a 1996 Artpace installation that became an art shop on South Flores and has been re-created by the artist from Los Angeles to New York.

In 2000, Mondini-Ruiz was selected for the prestigious Whitney Biennial. In 2004, he was awarded the Rome Prize for a residency at the American Academy in Rome. He has since staged shows from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to El Museo del Barrio in New York.

"I've known Franco a long time," says Almeida, who manages the University of Texas at San Antonio's art collection, which now includes two purchases from the "Almost an Onderdonk" series. "I've seen him grow over the years. He's very focused. He has a good vision. He's executing it, and now he's very successful."

Mondini-Ruiz, who jokes that he's an "artist better known for sticking diamond rings in doughnuts and calling it high art," has become a confident, much-in-demand painter.

His work ranges from the "Goya gowns," airy, empty dresses floating on a dark background, to highly sentimentalized Romantic European landscapes to panoramic views of "Vanishing Mexico." Onderdonk seems to be a logical step in the process.

"This is my interpretation of the San Antonio that I want people to love and hold onto," he says. "It's my interpretation of my dream of San Antonio. It's bold and modern, has some humor to it.
and hopelessly romanticizes the past.”

The irony is that Mondin-Ruiz is being completely unironic.

"The irony of it is that bluebonnets back in Onderdonk's day were considered high art," Almeida says. "Now, with Franco, they've come full circle."

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