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Art Theatre

**SEEKING – AND FINDING – THE LIGHT
IN ABSTRACT ART**

Aric Attas.

ARTS & THEATRE

Seeking – and finding – the light in abstract art

BY ELLEN FISCHER
Correspondent

As a photographer working in abstraction, Aric Attas is often asked the same two questions: “What is it, and how did you make it?”

“Those to me are the least interesting questions,” he says, adding, “It’s not the how, but the why.”

In the case of his series “Seeking the Light,” selections from which will be shown at the Center for Spiritual Care in August, the “why” of the creation of Attas’s photos took on new meaning in the midst of his own cancer treatment, when his photographs provided him with spiritual solace.

The photographs that comprise “Seeking the Light” are atmospheric compositions with interlocking geometric shapes that softly meld into one another, with many a long gradation of hue and tone in between. To say the photos are blurred would be beside the point, because they are not descriptive of objects. Attas’ works record the shifting relation-



Aric Attas's photo installation, "Seeking the Light."

ship between the presence of light and its absence.

Attas understands the confusion some might feel viewing “Seeking the Light.” He allows that the nature of photography demands that “something out there in the world” serve as the basis for his images, but for Attas, photography is more than

a slavish imitator of visible reality.

What was Attas pointing his camera at when he clicked the shutter for this group of works? He’ll never tell. That’s because, he says, revealing the mundane origins of his ethereal images would impede the viewer’s appreciation of them as works of art.

“I want people to engage the work in some way that hopefully has a meaning for them,” he explains.

Fortunately, Attas is not averse to speaking in general terms about his process.

The origin of his compositions is “a multifaceted reflective object in my home. I use a long exposure, and move the camera during the exposure, and that allows me to paint with light,” he says.

That’s the simple explanation. The concept behind the work is rooted in Attas’s meditation practice and personal study of Kabbalah, an esoteric school of thought that originated in Judaism.

“It’s the metaphysics of light, is one way you can think of it. Light is one



of the most important words in Kabbalah. It’s kind of a way of life, but it’s also very inspiring for my artwork. It’s a launching point,” Attas says.

Attas’s education in photography began after he graduated with a degree in psychology from Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, NY. That’s when he took a job as a commercial photographer’s assistant in Hartford, CT.

An interlude in Chicago followed where Attas worked for a number of commercial photographers before opening his own studio in that city. Returning to Connecticut, Attas entered the graduate photo program at Hartford Art School in West Hartford, where he was awarded an MFA in 1996. Prior to his 2003 move to Vero Beach, Attas taught and lectured on photography and art in colleges in the area, including the University of Connecticut.

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ARTS & THEATRE



Aric Attas teaching Photography 101 at the Vero Beach Museum of Art. PHOTO BY DENISE RITCHE

In Vero, Attas offers his services as a fine art and commercial photographer through his business, Aric Attas Creative. He teaches classes in photography and creativity at the Vero Beach Museum of Art and is one of the artist partners at Project Space 1785, an alternative gallery that opened earlier this year.

Prior to creating his "Seeking the Light" series, Attas's fine art photography was inspired by cosmology, the science of the origin of the universe.

"Relativity, quantum physics. I taught myself those subjects in lay terms. I'm not a mathematician, so I'm understanding them visually and conceptually. I'm using my art work to think about what would a black hole look like, or what would it look like to travel through space and time," he says.

When he was offered a show at the now-closed Lighthouse Art and Framing, he decided to create a body of work that was unlike anything he had done before. "Seeking the Light" was created as a reflection on, and reconciliation with, the arc of his life since coming to Vero. The series debuted in February 2014.

Attas wanted the audience experience at Lighthouse to be "immersive." The small scale of the gallery in relation to the photos in it – some as large as 30 by 40 inches – aided that.

"If you get in close enough to be absorbed by the work, you can actually feel a sense of movement, and space – even sort of an enveloping quality to them."

Attas uses the term "healing" to describe the sense of well-being he felt in creating "Seeking the Light."

The series' beneficial effect on him did not stop there.

Not long after the show came down, Attas was diagnosed with oral cancer. In processing the shock of that news, Attas turned to the wisdom he ac-

quired being an artist for guidance.

His art practice taught him "how to face things like fear through commitment, courage and creativity. As artists we are often in that place of fear of the unknown."

While he admits that artistic angst is "a different fear from facing cancer treatment," Attas insists that important similarities between the two exist.

In art, he says, "there are points where you want to give up, and you have to stay committed, and you have to have courage, and you have to engage your creativity."

After undergoing surgery to remove a tumor from his tongue, Attas applied creative solutions to the problem of getting through six weeks of radiation treatment.

That was done through being an artist, he says.

"In order to get radiation treatment, you lie on a table, and a machine shoots photons at you as it spins around your head. They use different angles so they can accumulate intense radiation in specific areas and minimize it in others, like your optic nerve."

The prospect of having his head enclosed in a fitted, immobilizing mask while holding a mouth guard between his jaws for the daily ten-minute treatments overwhelmed Attas with anxiety. In a test of the procedure, he found himself unable to lie still without gagging.

And so, in the week and a half before his treatments were to begin, he determined to master his fear.

"I play slide guitar, so I have some slides around (they are small glass cylinders). I stuck a slide in my mouth, and set the timer on my i-phone for ten minutes."

Recalling the serene environment of his show at Lighthouse, Attas summoned up in memory a large, primarily blue photograph that hung at the center of the gallery.

"I focused on that piece. If I felt myself gagging I'd go there, see the image in my mind's eye."

Over time he was able to overcome the urge to gag. "So that became my meditation."

And although it was "the most difficult thing I've ever done by far," Attas was able not only to conquer his anxiety but also, despite the discomfort of his irradiated mouth and throat, to take in enough food to maintain his weight, thereby avoiding the necessity of a feeding tube toward the end of his six-week ordeal.

Attas is justifiably proud of that accomplishment.

"I was one of the few people who've ever done that," he says.

Now he is eager to share his "Seeking the Light" imagery with others.

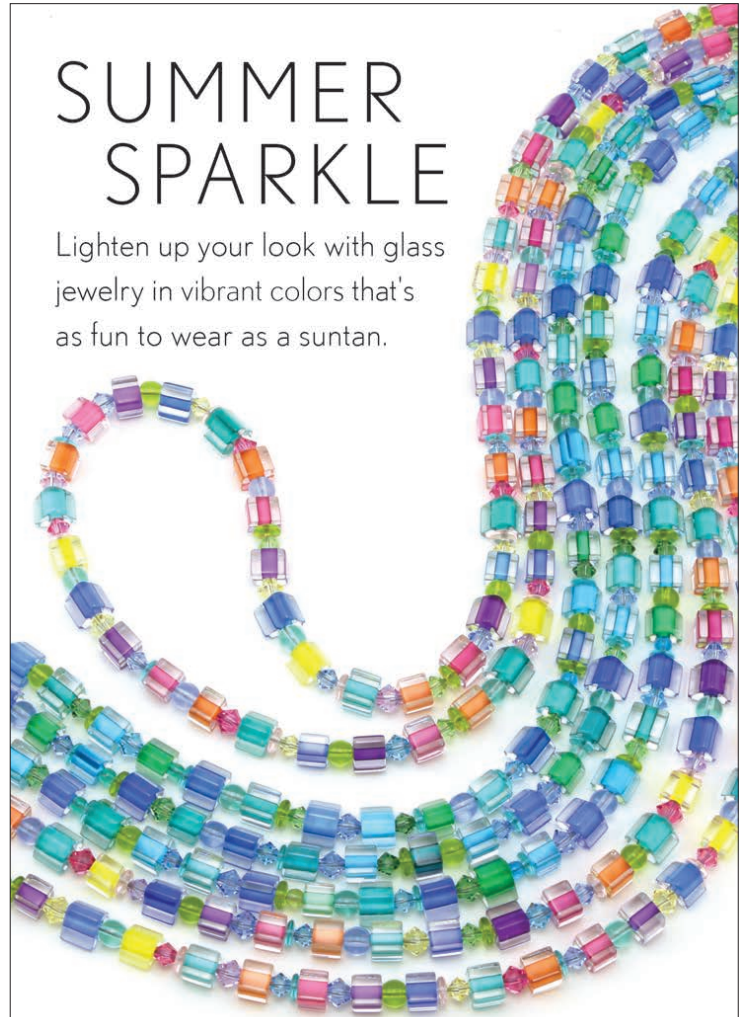
"That's why showing at the Center for Spiritual Care is important to me," he says.

"I hope my work facilitates a reflection, or a meditation, or even some small transformation. If it can open up some doors, that's incredible to me. That's a lofty aspiration. Whether it does that or not – my hope is that it does. I know it has for me."

A public reception for the exhibition will be held on the evening of Aug. 7 from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. ■

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