

Signal **ARTS**

From healing arts to visual arts



His hands no longer the steady tools of a doctor, Dr. Rufus Morgan has rigged an old fishing pole to his easel upon which he rests his hand as he moves the paintbrush back and forth across the canvas.

PHOTO BY CARI GERVIN

Dr. Rufus Morgan prepares for his first exhibition

BY CARI GERVIN
COMMUNITY NEWS WRITER

Once Dr. Rufus Morgan's hands were steady and sure. They injected shots and stitched up wounds; they measured pulses and comforted patients.

Dr. Morgan's hands now tremble and shake with age. They were never a problem in his work as a physician, first in Pikeville, Tenn., and then in the Memorial Hospital emergency room before he retired 21 years ago.

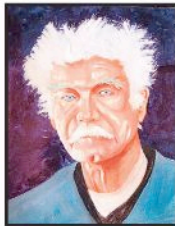
But Dr. Morgan has not let his quivering digits affect the passion that has consumed him since retirement. He can't work with the detail he once did, he said, but Dr. Morgan still spends hours and hours painting.

Today is his 86th birthday, and in two months, he will have his first-ever solo exhibition of paintings. For someone who has been painting for 21 years, who has closets literally full of his work, who has his paintings hanging on almost every wall of his house, it is about time.

Dr. Morgan first discovered art in the birthplace of the Renaissance — Florence, Italy. Stationed in the city for three months during World War II, Dr. Morgan occasionally had time to spare. One day, he ran into an old lady who offered to give him art lessons.

When he had spare time, Dr. Morgan would walk all the way across the city, carrying scraps of leftover food he took from the mess hall. The elderly woman taught him how to draw, and he kept her from starving.

When he returned to the states, Dr. Morgan painted his first small landscape on the back of a Lovemans Christmas gift box. But his medical practice soon consumed all his time. When he was



"Self-portrait," 1991, oil.

not working, Dr. Morgan went hunting or fishing to relax.

He painted only once or twice more before he retired in 1985. Then, possessed of all the free time in the world, Dr. Morgan taught himself how to paint with oils.

Most of his paintings are local scenes, like Fall Creek Falls, farms in Bledsoe County or vistas in the Sequatchie Valley. He paints portraits of friends he once had and people he once knew. Almost every painting has a story behind it — this was the "Ghost" that was really a raccoon with a belly full of glowworms, that was an old shop that burned down a few years back.

Dr. Morgan's bucolic scenes speak of a countryside rapidly disappearing. His impressionistic technique and use of color make the paintings look like the old photos and memories from which they are painted — soft, fading, a little bit blurry from being left too long in the light.

His shaking hands, too, partially contribute to this effect. So that he can continue to paint, Dr. Morgan has rigged an old fishing pole to his easel upon which he rests his hand as he moves the paintbrush back and forth across the canvas. He primes the canvas with a mixture of varnish, linseed oil and turpentine so that the paint "just pours on," he said.



"Beaty Cove Ghost," 2005, oil. Dr. Rufus Morgan said that before he bought his farm in Bledsoe County in the 1950s, someone had been murdered on the property. Not long afterwards, people began to report seeing a glowing light in the forest. Dr. Morgan eventually discovered that the light was not a ghost but a raccoon with a belly full of glowworms.

But Dr. Morgan's works are hardly imperfect by nature. He says he might "finish" a painting in two hours and then return to it again and again, sometimes next week, sometimes next year.

"What I like more than anything else is bringing (paintings) back in here and piddling with them," Dr. Morgan said, gesturing around the attic space he has converted into a studio. "Of course, sometimes I ruin them."

He said he's never been happy with even one painting and considered it completely finished. He has hundreds and hundreds of paintings in his house.

In May, 50 to 75 of those works will be on display in Dr. Morgan's old home in Pikeville. He said he is excited about his first exhibition but has no plans to try to market his work in Chattanooga.

"I paint because I enjoy painting," Dr. Morgan said. "When you paint, you don't think about anything else. It's a good way to go off into another world."

E-mail Cari Gervin at cgerwin@tfccommunitynews.com

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

■ Rufus Morgan will have his first-ever exhibition in May at the Perfect Light Gallery in Pikeville, Tenn. There will be an opening reception on May 12. For more information, call the gallery at (423) 447-3029.