

**“These paintings are partly about my romanticizing of camp life — they express my deep affection for camp — and I hope other people will pick up on that feeling as well.”**

PAUL RYAN  
Artist



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

Many Americans can identify with Paul Ryan's camp imagery. A 2006 estimate placed annual camp enrollments in the U.S. at more than 14 million.

# Summer camp inspires paintings

Artist-teacher hopes people pick up on his deep affection for that life

BY ROY PROCTOR  
Special Correspondent

**P**aul Ryan, who stands 6-foot-8 in his stocking feet, towers over most other Virginia artists. Four decades ago, when he first settled into his cabin nestled in the stately pines along Lake Michigan, he was on his way to becoming a giant among campers, too.

Ryan came late to Camp Leelanau for Boys.

He was 13.

But the summer-camp experience never left him.

“I loved that camp,” Ryan, now 53, says as he chats amid the seven large oil-and-acrylic paintings on canvas in “the camp under the moon,” his new solo show at the Reynolds Gallery. “I kept going back because I had such a good time.”

“The setting in northern Michigan was beautiful, and there was so much to do. Hiking trips. River trips. It was upscale, but we lived in a pretty simple way — cabins, not tents, but the cabins were rustic.”

Leelanau is an American Indian word meaning “Land of Delight,” and Ryan explored the camp's delights for eight summers, four as a camper, then four as a counselor.

Meanwhile, he was growing up in a blur of cities in his native Indiana.

He graduated cum laude in English at Principia College in Elmhurst, Ill., and something happened in his senior year that changed his path forever.

“I took a course in aesthetics in the philosophy department,” Ryan recalls.

“I had been drawing since I was a kid, and I took some art courses — one in drawing, another in watercolor — at Principia and had reached the basic level of art. But that course opened my eyes and my mind to a completely new



Detail of “it rained in the morning so I took library,” 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 12 x 90 inches.

way of looking at art, a conceptual way. Before that, I had thought of art as a picture-making exercise.

“That course excited me to the possibility of being a painter.”

Don't expect old-style naturalistic Boy Scout manual depictions of campers telling ghost stories around campfires in “the camp under the moon.”

Ryan's education and subsequent career didn't condition him for that.

He holds a master's in fine art in painting and drawing from Virginia Commonwealth University.

“I was doing more gestural work — more abstract, thicker paint surfaces, painting very much influenced by abstract expressionism — when I came out of VCU,” he says.

He turned to the much sparer camp imagery in his current show about 18 months ago, more than a decade after he had settled into a career teaching art and art criticism at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton and directing the campus' Hunt Gallery.

Three of Ryan's “camp under the moon” paintings are as horizontal — 12 inches high by 90 inches wide — as

gesting American Indian motifs.

“I've collected a lot of camper images — online and elsewhere — and I go through this long selection process when I start a painting,” he says. “I cut out the images I select with scissors and place them on the surface and trace around them with a pencil. Then I begin the slow process of painting. The green forms are taken from images in photographs by Edward Curtis, who documented Native American culture. I wasn't thinking of Matisse's cutouts consciously when I was doing these paintings, but subconsciously they are probably there.”

Ryan obviously is drawing imagery from a well with which many Americans can identify. A 2006 estimate placed annual camp enrollments in the U.S. at more than 14 million.

“Among social institutions, only public schools have touched the lives of more youngsters,” art historian Abigail A. Van Slych writes in her book, “A Manufactured Wilderness.”

“One of the ideas behind these paintings is that institutions — summer camp or school or whatever — are more complex than we think they are,” Ryan says. “When I was a naive camper, I just went to camp to have fun and didn't think much about the reasons why. Today, I see summer camp as an odd confluence of North American culture, pioneer culture, Victorian culture and the back-to-nature movement that started late in the 19th century.”

“Those circles in the square paintings serve structural purposes, but I also think of them as moons. The moon serves as a constant reminder that we live between nature and culture.”

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**“THE CAMP UNDER THE MOON”**  
(new paintings by Paul Ryan)  
Where: Reynolds Gallery, 1514 W. Main St.  
When: through March 7  
Price: \$7,000 each  
Info: (804) 355-6553

Ryan is tall, a format he has been exploring for a decade.

The other four, a recent departure, are square.

In each, silhouettes — some suggesting such camp activities as rowing, running and diving, others drawing on American Indian motifs — are painted with great precision against brightly colored grounds.

“These paintings are partly about my romanticizing of camp life — they express my deep affection for camp — and I hope other people will pick up on that feeling as well.”

Ryan limits his palette to three or four bright colors.

In one horizontal painting, for example, campers in red silhouettes are going about their daily routines. These forms are balanced by green forms sug-



“a boat to sail of our own,” 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 12 x 90 inches.



“monday afternoon,” 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 8 x 90 inches.