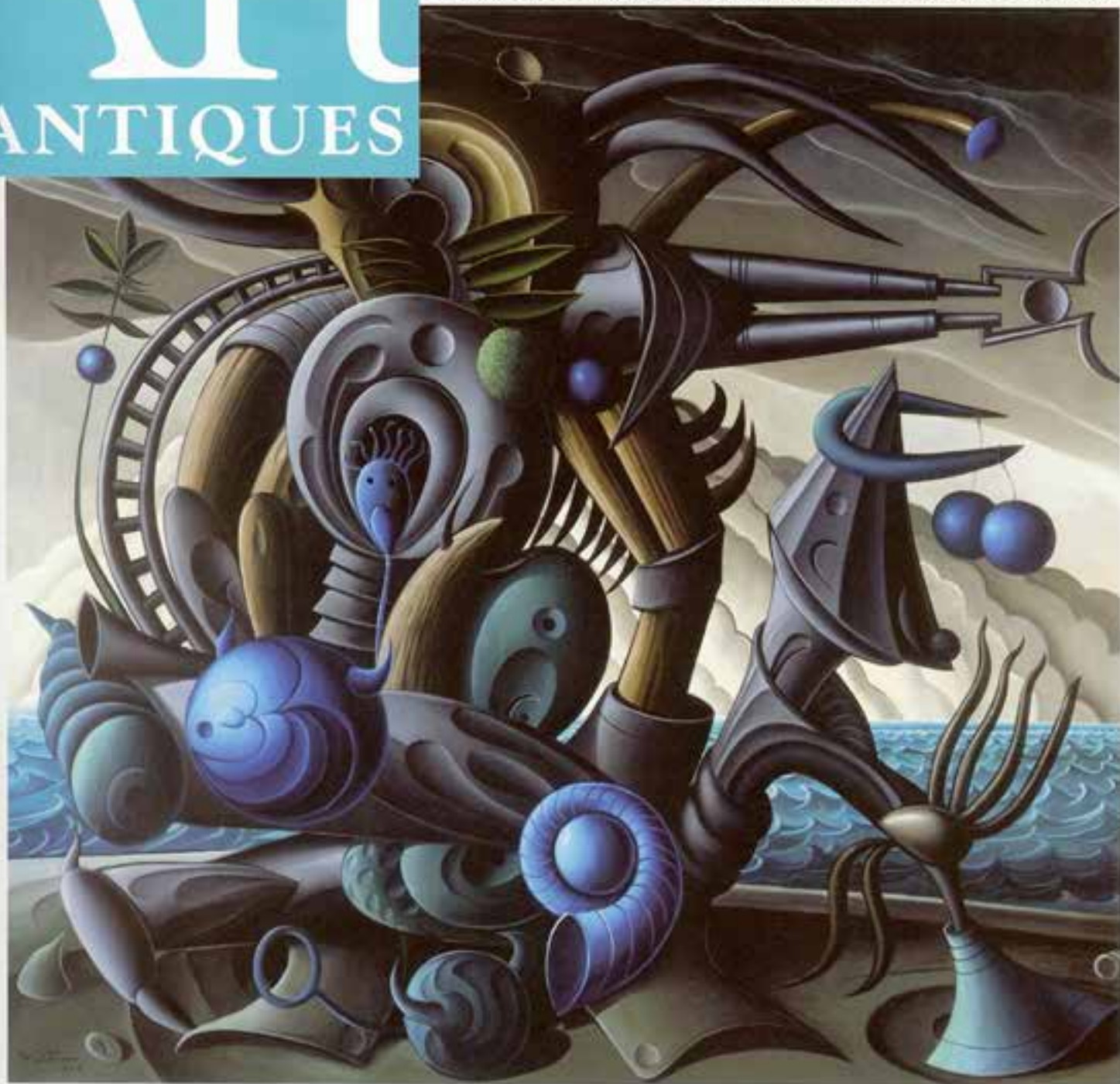


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Art

ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



FASHION IN THE MUSEUM | ILLUSTRATION ART | GABRIEL METSU | GIOVANNI BELLINI



VALTON TYLER'S VISIONS

STRANGE FIRES

VALTON TYLER'S
VISIONARY
PAINTINGS
ARE SOME OF THE
MOST MYSTERIOUS—
AND ODDLY ALLURING—
IMAGES ANYWHERE ON THE
CONTEMPORARY SCENE.

By Edward M. Gómez

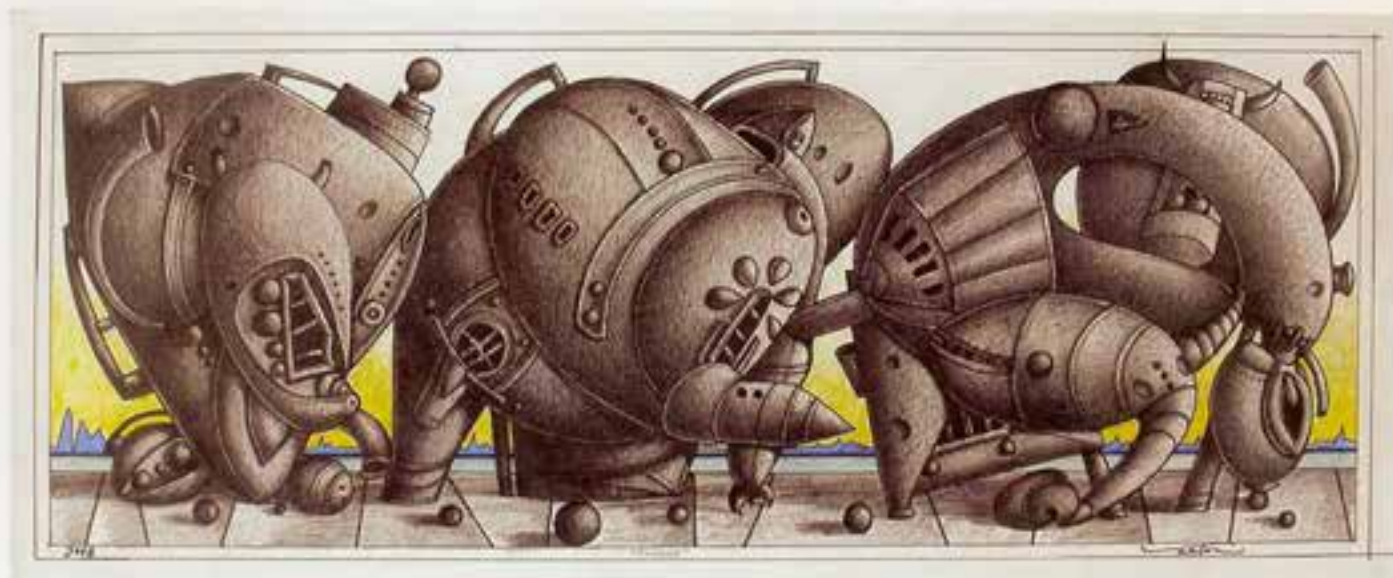
Valton Tyler, *Untitled*, 2000, oil on linen, 78 x 96 inches.





PHOTO BY FERNANDO ROJAS FOR THE SUSAN W. AND CLAUDE C. ALBRITTON COLLECTION, GALLAT

WHEN THE PAINTER VALTON TYLER was three years old, in the spring of 1947, one of the worst industrial accidents in American history took place in his hometown of Texas City, Tex., on the Gulf of Mexico coast. A freighter in the port, loaded with more than 2,000 tons of fertilizer, ignited and exploded, setting off massive fires as other ships, a chemical



plant and the refinery that dominated the town went up in flames. The blast shattered windows even in Houston and was felt 100 miles to the northeast, in Louisiana. Of the Texas City Disaster, as the incident became known, Tyler recalls, "I was very young but I remember it well. Everyone thought it was the end of the world." He saw "flames that were bright red at the bottom of the fire and pitch black at the top, stretching high into the sky," and says, "Even today, I have nightmares."



This page: *Untitled*, 2000, oil on linen, 64 x 72 inches. Opposite: *Friends*, 2008, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 21 x 50 inches.

Those haunting memories and other colorful visions seem to have inspired Tyler to create some of the most unusual works to be found anywhere on the contemporary-art scene. Tyler's finely crafted paintings, some as large as the most ambitious Abstract-Expressionist tableaux, defy easy categorization. His images of part-machine, part-plant, part-architectural structures, which he calls "my shapes," suggest Star Trek spaceships on steroids or aberrant growths from a futuristic Amazon. They are simultaneously surreal, cartoonish, sci-fi fantastic and apocalyptic-baroque, set in unearthly landscapes that seem timeless.

Claude C. Albritton III, founder and president of the board of the McKinney Avenue Contemporary (commonly known as "The MAC"), a contemporary-arts center in Dallas, has com-

missioned many original paintings from Tyler. He says, "One could argue that all of his pictures are somehow a reaction to the Texas City fire." After all, the collector notes, Tyler's dramatic images recall the hulking, ominous forms of the huge oil refineries the artist grew up seeing along the coast. Tyler himself admits as much, acknowledging, "I've never been able to shake those childhood memories, but my shapes are not only inspired by the fire; they also come from my mind and from somewhere deep inside me."

Technically speaking, Tyler is a self-taught artist, a skilled draftsman, printmaker and painter. However, unlike many of his peers from the South who also were not trained at art schools and who have primarily made their very personal works for themselves,



Gathering, 2000, oil on linen, 76 x 84 inches.

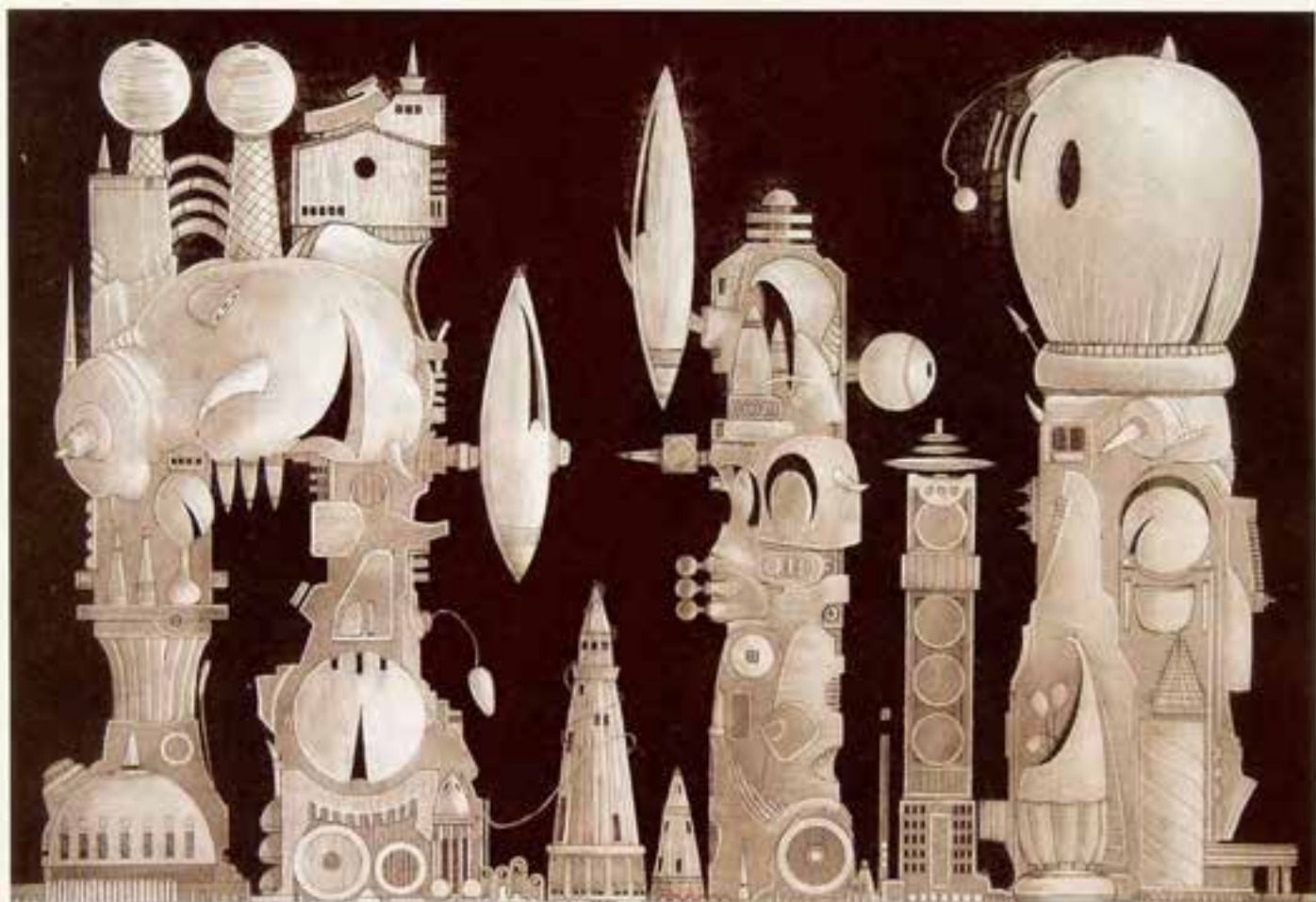
with little or no concern about mainstream media or art-market trends, Tyler does not make pictures of local people, animals or places. He does not use cheap, plain house paint or mud applied to any scrap of board. He does not make mixed-media assemblages that share affinities with the traditional “yard art” that decorates the gardens of many rural, Southern homes.

Instead, this fedora-wearing, Texas-drawing elf of a man, who struggles with diabetes, pains from a recent hip surgery and other ailments, paints with oil on canvas using a sophisticated glazing technique in which he builds up numerous layers of transparent washes to create luminous, vividly modeled forms. Sometimes he mixes straight-out-of-the-tube oils right on the canvas, even as he is painting. Normally, the method of glazing is associated with Renaissance painters, especially those of the Netherlandish school of the 15th century, among whom it originated. It is not a method that typically comes to mind when thinking about a self-taught painter like Tyler, who lives and works in a small house

in Garland, a quiet suburb to the northeast of downtown Dallas.

Giorgio Vasari, in his 16th-century *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, the big bio-survey that established the Renaissance canon as we know it, described pictures of wild beasts and monsters by the Florentine painter Piero di Cosimo as being so “bizarre” and “fantastic” and so packed with “strangeness” that they seized viewers’ attention with their inescapable allure. Similarly, there is something about Tyler’s pictures that is mysterious and compelling, offering a technical tour de force and a curious spectacle at the same time.

Tyler’s father ran an auto-body repair shop and was known as a skilled mixer of shiny paint colors for cars. But he struggled with depression and alcoholism, as a result of which young Valton bounced around between his own family’s and his relatives’ homes. He claims that at the time of the Texas City Disaster he had an out-of-body experience and, later, as a teenager, that he was visited by an angel who pinned him to his bed—but did not



deliver any special message from on high. Also during his teen years, while visiting his grandmother's home in northern Texas, he made drawings with, he pointedly recalls, a heightened sense of awareness about what he was doing. "I remember making lines in a plain school notebook," he says, "and watching as they became alive and took shape. As I drew, I became aware that this was something I would never want to stop doing."

Tyler dropped out of high school but later earned a diploma after moving with his mother and sister to Dallas, where his older brother, Robert, an architectural draftsman, already resided.

There, he enrolled in a commercial-art school but disliked the curriculum so much that he soon left. On his own, though, he read about modern art in the public library and became especially interested in the work of Vincent van Gogh. Later, he worked as an embosser at an engraving company. In 1968, when he was in his early 20s, a friend introduced him to Lucille Teasel, a former drugstore owner from Canada who had become an antiques dealer. Teasel instantly recognized Tyler's precocious talent and offered him a room in her home in exchange for art materials and his help around her shop.



From top: 154-Foot Sculpture That Never Was, 1971, aquatint and etching, 1 of 50, 25 x 33 1/2 inches; Darkness Over the Garden, 2009, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 16 x 72 inches.



Teasel remarked in a newspaper interview several years before her death in 2006 at the age of 100, "After all these years, I still don't understand Valton's art. Sometimes I don't even like it. But I know he's good at it and that he has to do it. He is someone who has to paint." Prolific and seeking appreciation for his art, as a young man Tyler used to leave his drawings along the sides of Dallas streets so that passers-by could stop, pick them up and take them, free of charge.

By the time he had met "Miss Teasel," Tyler's life had been marked by a whole jukebox worth of country-song foibles and woes. His new "guardian angel," as he called her, helped steer him away from the heavy drinking by which he sometimes tried to escape his own bouts of depression. In fact, he admits, alcohol only made his condition worse, but each time he shook off a hangover, he felt more eager than ever to get back to making art. In 1970, Robert Tyler showed his brother's drawings to the late Donald Vogel, the founder, with this wife, of Valley House Gallery in Dallas and himself an accomplished modernist painter. Vogel responded enthusiastically to Tyler's unusual ink-on-paper drawings, which depicted, the artist recalls, "primitive versions of what later became my more complex shapes."

The dealer arranged for Tyler to be able to use the printmaking workshop at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, where he effectively taught himself etching, aquatint and other techniques. Remarkably, in a just about a year's time, he produced editions

of 54 separate print images, including skillfully modeled anthropomorphic or architectural forms with wiry outlines. In a 1972 book of reproductions of these prints, Tyler noted that, in them, he had tried "to come as close" as he could "to sculpture without sacrificing the beauty and emotion of the etched lines." Indeed, he has long believed that his "shapes" could actually be realized three-dimensionally on a monumental scale.

Vogel encouraged Tyler to make oil paintings and offered to purchase such works as regularly as he produced them. That arrangement lasted almost two decades, providing the young artist with some income and Valley House with a growing inventory of his paintings. Today, the gallery still has a large supply of Tyler's canvases from that period. Also in Dallas, Royd and Connie Riddell have been collecting Tyler's more recent, large-format pencil-on-paper drawings, which are available at their gallery and frame shop, Riddell Rare Maps & Fine Prints.

Tyler often develops an image using a limited palette of essentially primary colors (red, blue, yellow) or of certain primaries combined with complementary colors (purple, green, orange). He also works monochromatically in a grisaille mode or with single-color-based palettes. Giving his pictures such singular titles as *Cock-a-Do*, *Thumbs-up* or *Goo Goo from the Galoon*, Tyler sets his "shapes" against gradated-color backdrops; sometimes more elaborate, they appear as cloud-filled skies or as tranquil waters rippling with gentle waves. Up front, his enigmatic, monumental



From top: *Come to Me*, 2000, oil on linen, 20 x 72 inches; *Gun Slinger*, 2009, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 15 1/2 x 68 inches.



Clockwise from top: *The Clock*, 1990, oil on canvas, 40 x 48 inches; *Pea's Blue and Red*, 1984, oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches; *Friendly Squabble*, 1991, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.



"shapes" hold their places against such vivid fields of color with self-assurance and grandeur. Early in his career, Tyler's looming, brooding forms were primarily machine-like and architectural, usually set in the near foreground of a painting or drawing's pictorial space. Later, they became more pliant and sometimes more plant-like, in compositions that resembled jungle clusters of trees, vines and underbrush.

Tyler says that, as he sees them, the strange structures he conjures up in his pictures "are alive and they all have feelings." In 2000, on the occasion of a retrospective of his work at the MAC, he told the now-retired dealer Phyllis Kind, who later showed his paintings at her New York gallery: "My forms communicate with one another. They are having fun together, and I feel free and happy when I am making them but I have to leave them and let them go their way..." Tyler has often said that, in his imagination, he sees whole compositions that he feels compelled to immediately set out to paint.

With this in mind, he points to numerous pencil-on-paper drawings scattered on the floor of his modest studio, a simple, boxy room attached to the back of his bungalow. Sipping from an ever-present bottle of Diet Coke, the artist says, "These pictures just flow, and I try to get them down as fast as they come. Sometimes, but not always, they serve as starting points for paintings." In the sparsely furnished studio, a long, old wooden church pew stands against one wall, facing an easel Tyler uses for smaller pictures and another wall on which he hangs larger, stretched canvases-in-progress. On a little table next to his easel lies a pile of oil-paint tubes and cans stuffed with bouquets of well-worn brushes. A few wooden stools, their tops covered in multicolored patches of buttery paint, serve as easy-access palettes. Tyler explains, "As I'm working, I can almost feel my shapes' different personalities guiding me as they emerge through the paint. Sometimes they're subtle; sometimes they're strong."

In a local newspaper article published at the time of Tyler's survey at the MAC, Murray Smither, a regional folk art expert and collector of self-taught artists' works who curated the exhibition, told a reporter, "We were driving somewhere...Valton was driving and he says, 'I am seeing this building with a hole in it.' I said, 'You're driving, Val. Just drive.' He was seeing this whole form." Smither recognized that Tyler's art was and is born of total creative freedom. "His paintings are not burdened by some awful weight of certain schools or traditions in art," he observed, adding, "There's nothing there that he connects to. He just paints. He has to."

Tyler's close friend Rika Rosenbach, an art collector and former antiques dealer who often helps the absent-minded artist stay on something of a tidy track—reminding him to take his medicines, helping him with administrative tasks—notes that viewers who "do not understand 'what it is' or 'what it means' when



This page, from top: *Still Life*, 1970, line etching, 1 of 50, 24 x 17 1/2 inches; Valton Tyler in the Riddella's map and print shop in Dallas.

Opposite: *Darwin's Sea*, 1984, oil on canvas, 78 x 86 inches.



they look at Valton's art have missed the point." She says, "They have no frame of reference to relate it to because it is not based on reality. Then there are those who are blown away by this work's uniqueness, concreteness, color, shading and original subject matter and, above all, by the skill and talent of the artist. They recognize Valton's genius."

Tyler has long been known for his marathon work sessions. In 1971, when he was making prints at SMU, students would arrive for classes in the morning, only to find the artist slumped over a table, where he had fallen asleep the night before. Last year, he fell and injured his hip—an accident that led to surgery—while trying to move a large painting in his studio by himself around two o'clock in the morning. Lately he has been working on a new painting, a triptych, and the effort has been unusually taxing for

him. He says with frustration: "It's a commission, and the canvas that was provided is not what I'm used to working on, so I'm having a lot of trouble getting used to it, and the paint isn't even adhering as it should." For a change, this new work is based on an external source, Psalm 22, which is one of Tyler's favorite Old Testament passages. Tyler's large picture uses his "shapes" to symbolically represent such themes as God's power and man's vulnerability, which are cited in the Biblical verses.

"I will get it done, and it will turn out well," he says confidently. "I see the shapes I have to paint, and what I see is my guide." Dipping his brush into a patch of color on one of his paint-encrusted palette-stools, Tyler reassures himself and adds, "I'm already seeing a new composition, too. Each new painting gives birth to the next one. It's my job to bring these visions into this world." ■