

Lon Michels, A Soul on Fire, Solaris Hill

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Lon Michels: A Soul on Fire

By Mark Howell

Last summer one of America's most spectacular painters faced a personal and professional crisis.

A retinal infection caused Lon Michels, 41, to temporarily lose his sight.

But it did not stop him painting in his studio, the artist completed two enormous rectangular abstractions plus two smaller canvases. Using the same principal, he said, "as a kid tracing a pattern in the dark with a sparkler.

These amazing works — 'They make me want to dance.' said one viewer — are included among the 60 or so other extraordinary paintings in Lon Michels' new exhibition at the Customs House here in Key West. Michels was born in Wisconsin, his mother, Shirley, due to attend the opening of the show last night, painted every surface in the house where he was raised. "She's as beautiful as the flowers she paints," he said. Michels' father was a stonemason, all three of his brothers are stonemasons, his sisters are a lawyer, newspaperwoman, housewife and a singer, and most of these people are in his paintings.

Michels' mother, for example, looks a lot like Buddha's mother Tara in his 9ft by 12ft masterpiece, "Freedom" after which the Customs House show is named. A tribute to Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, plus Botticelli's "Primavera".

Another shocker of its time," said the painter. Freedom also includes Hindu-like renditions of an Australian Kelly Everman of Kindred Spirit and in the first portrait completed on this huge canvas. Tim Albrecht, who supplied the excellent cake that the artist shared during Solaris Hill's visit that week.

When he left Wisconsin for New York, Michels answered an ad for a studio assistant and of the 5000 applicants, he was the one hired. His new boss was Louise Nevelson, the Russian-born abstract expressionist sculptor, "the first person who'd come out into the world that I'd ever met, I was her humble servant.

"Freedom" at the Customs House, 281 Front St. runs through March 28th, 2004.