

**Television**

*The Biggest Loser* returns at 7 p.m. today on NBC. **PAGE 2E**

# STYLE

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

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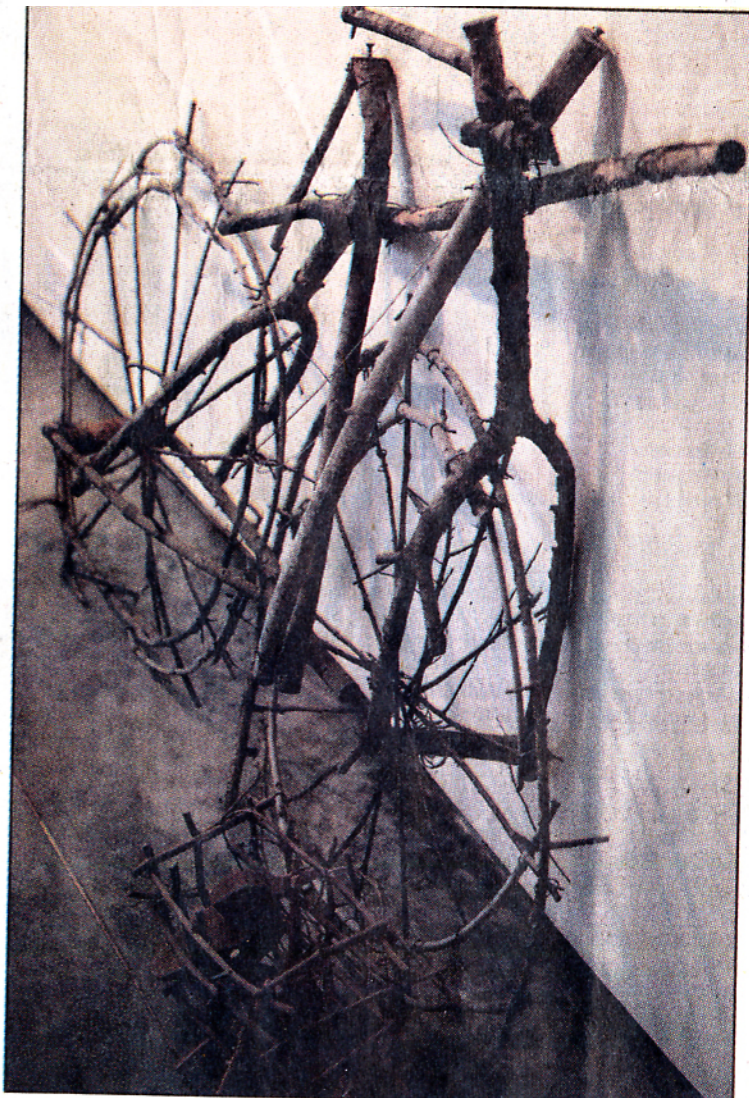
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2009



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BOB COLEMAN

Arkansas-born artist George Dombek moved to Goshen in 1994. The watercolorist, who formerly taught architecture and art, also has a studio in New York. His new work will be featured at a show, "Water Color Series," which opens Friday at Greg Thompson Fine Art in North Little Rock.

## Rock, paper, water



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BOB COLEMAN

A bicycle made of sticks leans against a wall in George Dombek's studio in Goshen. Stick objects, including fish, are made by Dombek and placed in trees in his paintings.

Gallery's first solo show features George Dombek, of Arkansas and New York

MICHELLE PARKS  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

**G**OSHEN — George Dombek, known for his paintings of rocks and stick bicycles in trees, has focused on something else the last few years: bamboo, grasses and flower blossoms. He created the new pieces in his studio, which is on 6 acres just outside this community east of Fayetteville.

These works will be part of "Water Color Series," the first solo exhibition hosted by Greg Thompson Fine Art, a gallery that opened this summer in the Argenta area of North Little Rock. The show runs Friday through Nov. 14.

The 30-some paintings will also include Dombek's pieces from his Ozark Portraits series (images of rusted junkyard objects) and water towers, inspired by those found on some buildings in New York, where he also has a studio. The plants in many of the new pieces feature droplets of water, which inspired the title of the show.

Dombek met Thompson when he had a show at the Arkansas Arts Center in 1994; Thompson became his dealer soon afterward. Thompson says he chose Dombek for his first solo show because "he's one of Arkansas' premier artists and has been for many years."



Courtesy of George Dombek

Flower blossoms are a recent subject for painter George Dombek. Red will be featured in his new one-man show opening Friday at Greg Thompson Fine Art in North Little Rock.

Thompson, also an artist, says the tight focus of Dombek's paintings can have a Zen-like quality for the viewer.

"I think Dombek's about distilling things to their essence," Thompson says. "There's kind of a mystery and a sense of grace ... that I think really captivates people."

Dombek, a native of the Logan County town of Paris, has a bachelor's degree in architecture and a master's degree in fine arts, both from the University

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# Dombek

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of Arkansas and earned in the 1970s. For about the first 20 years, Dombek painted architectural, manmade things: steel mills in Ohio, fire escapes in San Francisco, tobacco barns in Florida. He started painting rocks 20 years ago while living and teaching in Italy after he encountered the marble beaches of the island of Elba off the coast of the Tuscany region.

People connected with the rock paintings, and the sales of the works made him realize he could leave teaching and make a living just from his art.

"People think I'm really crazy about rocks," says Dombek, whose influences include abstract painters such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. "But I don't have a real passionate attraction to rocks. I paint rocks because they allow me to investigate certain formal things in art. To me, they're abstract shapes that allow me to position them different ways and with different colors."

He also makes things out of sticks, including bicycles, which he placed in trees in his paintings. The bicycles and other objects blend in, and seem part of the natural structure. A poster company has sold more than 25,000 copies of one such image.

After several variations on a bicycle, he tried another stick construction several months ago: a fish, assembled from twigs of a Carolina hawthorn tree. The resulting painting will be part of his new exhibit. The neutral colors of the trees and twig fish contrast with bluish-green leaves that suggest water.

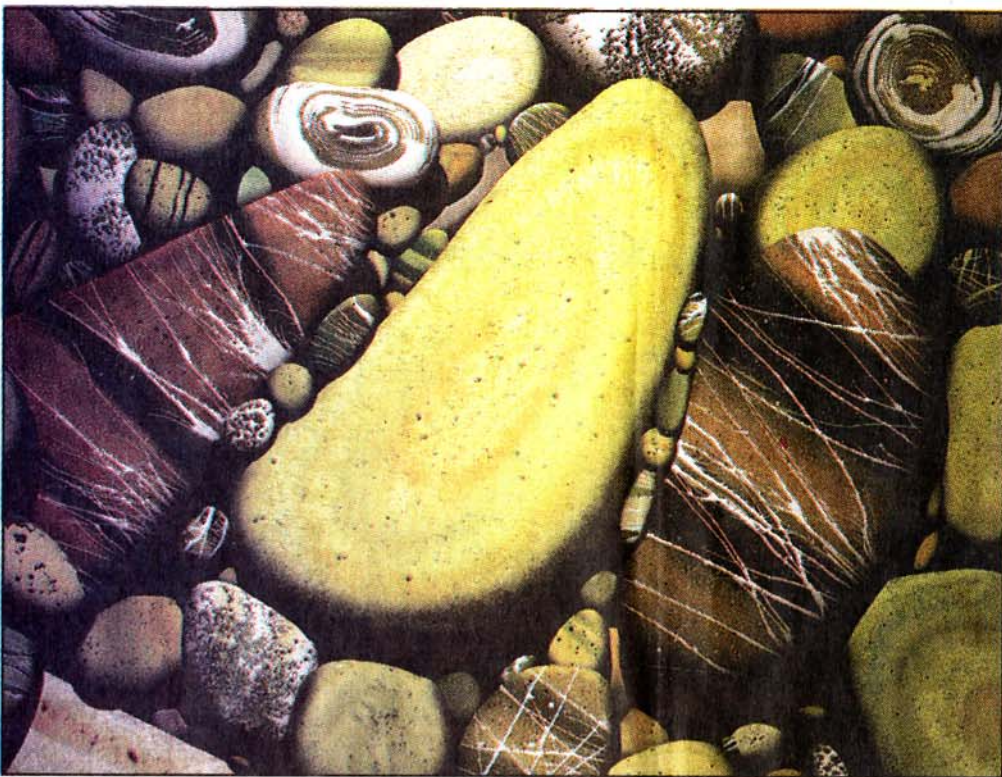
Dombek also has used sticks to create a woman in repose, and is thinking about making two jumping fish, like in a Winslow Homer painting. He can also imagine making airplanes and horses from sticks.

"I'm having, it seems like, about as much fun as I've had in a long time," says Dombek, 65. "I've got a lot of energy right now."

After two marriages and no children, he and longtime girlfriend Sandy Twiggs married a couple of years ago. And he's fallen in love with her 2-year-old grandson. The boy often stays with them, and Dombek is planning to paint a portrait of him, using a model made of sticks.

★ ★ ★

As a student, Dombek



Courtesy of George Dombek

Artist George Dombek is well known internationally for his paintings of rocks, inspired by the marble beaches on Italy's Elba island some 20 years ago. Dombek's success in exploring the abstract shapes of rocks on canvas made him realize he could make a living as an artist.

was painting "loose" — with strokes suggesting the intended details — like most people do with watercolors. But halfway through graduate school, he started spending more time on preparation and used some architecture tools.

After garnering no notice in earlier painting competitions, he paid his way through graduate school on award money from those later paintings, winning 40 to 50 awards as a student. Having tasted success, he got into a gallery in New York and had a one-man show in San Francisco, where he worked as an architect. But he soon realized he'd have to sell a lot of paintings to make a living, so he taught architecture and art for 18 years at Youngstown (Ohio) State University and Florida A&M University, among others.

Part of his attraction to light and shadows in his paintings goes back to architecture.

"Architecture is about space," he says. "So, particularly early on, a lot of the paintings have to do with a spatial illusion. It's not a real deep space, it's not a landscape, but there is a spatial element in all of the paintings."

His process is also architectural: "You could almost say I build a painting, as opposed to I paint a painting."

The subjects of watercolor paintings are often soft in color and edges — frankly, watery looking. Dombek's are

## "Water Color Series" Paintings by George Dombek

Friday through Nov. 14, Greg Thompson Fine Art, 429 Main St., North Little Rock. A reception for the artist will be held 5-8 p.m. Friday.

Admission: free  
(501) 664-2787

bold and striking with sharp edges and rich, often vivid colors. He achieves that color by applying many layers of watercolors.

The white rocks in some pieces are unpainted paper. He sometimes puts paint on and then takes it off, like the light reflected in raindrops on blades of grass.

The contrasting bright light and dark shadows in *Rain*, a close-up of blades of grass, are reminiscent of the crisscrossing interior beams of tobacco barns he did years ago.

Some people say the paintings look like photographs. They mean it as a compliment, noting the sharpness of details, the zoomed-in focus of the composition. But he's not a realist, and a photograph of the same subject wouldn't look the same.

Dombek looks to nature and manmade objects for inspiration for subject matter. He often takes photographs of subjects in bright sunlight to use as a reference point to get the shadows right. He's also collected a lot of rocks.

"I'm always responding to a visual experience," he says.

People note the control he must have when painting, and he admits he's a control freak. "There's control, but a lot of it is spontaneity."

Dombek paints with cheap paintbrushes, even toothbrushes — his favorite is made from two toothbrush heads attached to the end of a foot-long slat of wood.

"It gets me out of a mold," he says.

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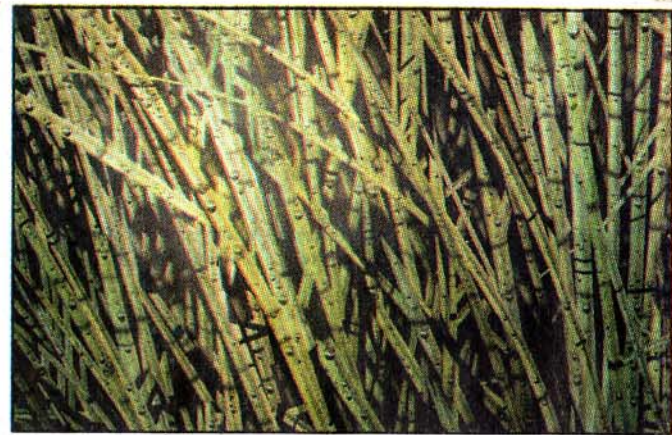
In 1994, Dombek moved from Florida to Goshen, where he built a studio with an apartment upstairs. He built a separate studio about six years ago and remodeled the original studio into a house. The studio was designed as a protective wall between the house and Blue Springs Road. Both structures are rectangular and covered in corrugated metal siding and roofing.

"I've always found remodeling is a lot more fun than dreaming up the whole concept," he says.

Dombek wanted the studio to feel roomy and to have natural light. A large square window offers a view of the landscaped yard from his easel; smaller square windows border the top of the white walls in the open, two-story space where he works.

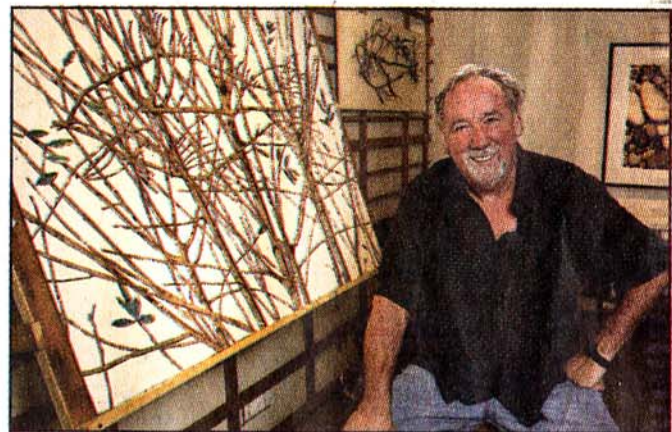
After having had 20 studios — from a garage to a room over a bar — Dombek plans to stay in Arkansas.

But in 2005, he won a Ma-



Courtesy of George Dombek

George Dombek's *Rain* has sharp edges and rich, vivid colors. Dombek achieves his colors by applying many layers of watercolor.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BOB COLEMAN

George Dombek sits next to one of his paintings, which includes one of his fish made of sticks. Dombek has made other objects from sticks, including a woman in repose, for his paintings.

rie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation grant, which got him a small studio space in New York's Tribeca neighborhood for a year. He then met other arts patrons who've given him a good deal on a Brooklyn space.

Dombek's work is in more than 1,000 private collections and more than 60 museum and corporate collections, including Tyson Foods in Springdale; McDonald's Corp. in Chicago; Chase Manhattan Bank in New York; the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio; and the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama. His more than 80 awards include the Governor's Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Arkansas Arts Council and the prestigious Pollock-Krasner Foundation award.

Though New York is "the center of the art market," he says, "lots of artists are producing work someplace else."

The best part of New York for him is looking at art — like the show of Van Gogh drawings that brought him to tears. Most of what he gets excited about is found in commercial galleries there, like those in Chelsea.

"I'm not really crazy about old, brown paintings, a Rem-

brandt or something like that," he says. "I like art that I haven't seen before."

Seeing fresh work inspires him to get back into his studio.

The landscaping on his 6-acre Goshen property has no long vistas. Instead, he's created smaller spaces with vegetation — sharp-edged plants like hostas, ferns and bamboo — and lots of pine trees. He lost more than 100 pines in this past winter's ice storm and has planted more.

In his paintings, the views are all tightly focused — sometimes a single flower blossom or the center of a bamboo stand.

"I like to be up close to things," he says.

Dombek often starts working before dawn and paints until 5 p.m. Most days, he walks around his land at sunrise and again in the evening.

"I like to walk around the same place because I see things differently. I get to see them real well," he says.

Dombek notices details, and his work shows them to people who maybe don't notice.

"They don't see what's around them because they become accustomed to seeing it," he says.