

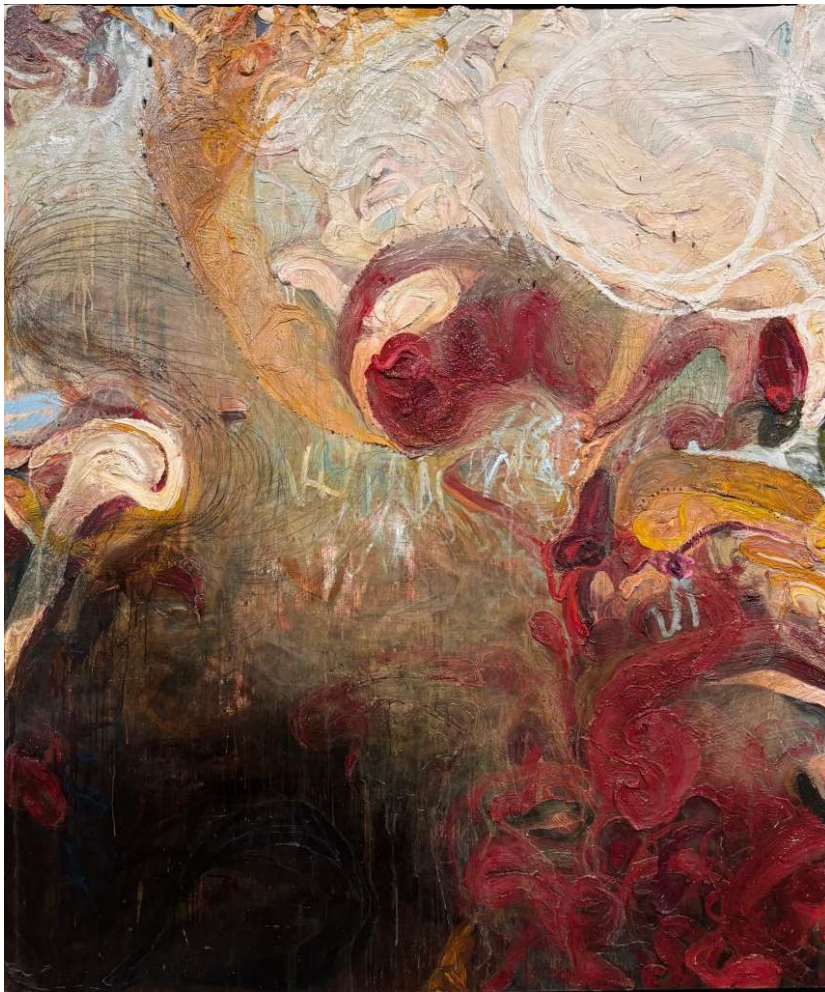
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Magnificent early Brian Rutenberg paintings back in South Carolina

Major donation to Greenville Museum, where the artist had his first museum show

July 20/25

Late last year, a collector donated 15 paintings by Brian Rutenberg to the [Greenville County Museum of Art](#). They were up briefly, then down, now back up. If you are at all interested in the South Carolina native's art, and especially if you saw his recent exhibition at the Sumter Gallery of Art, you don't want to miss this.



"Spring," 1993-1994

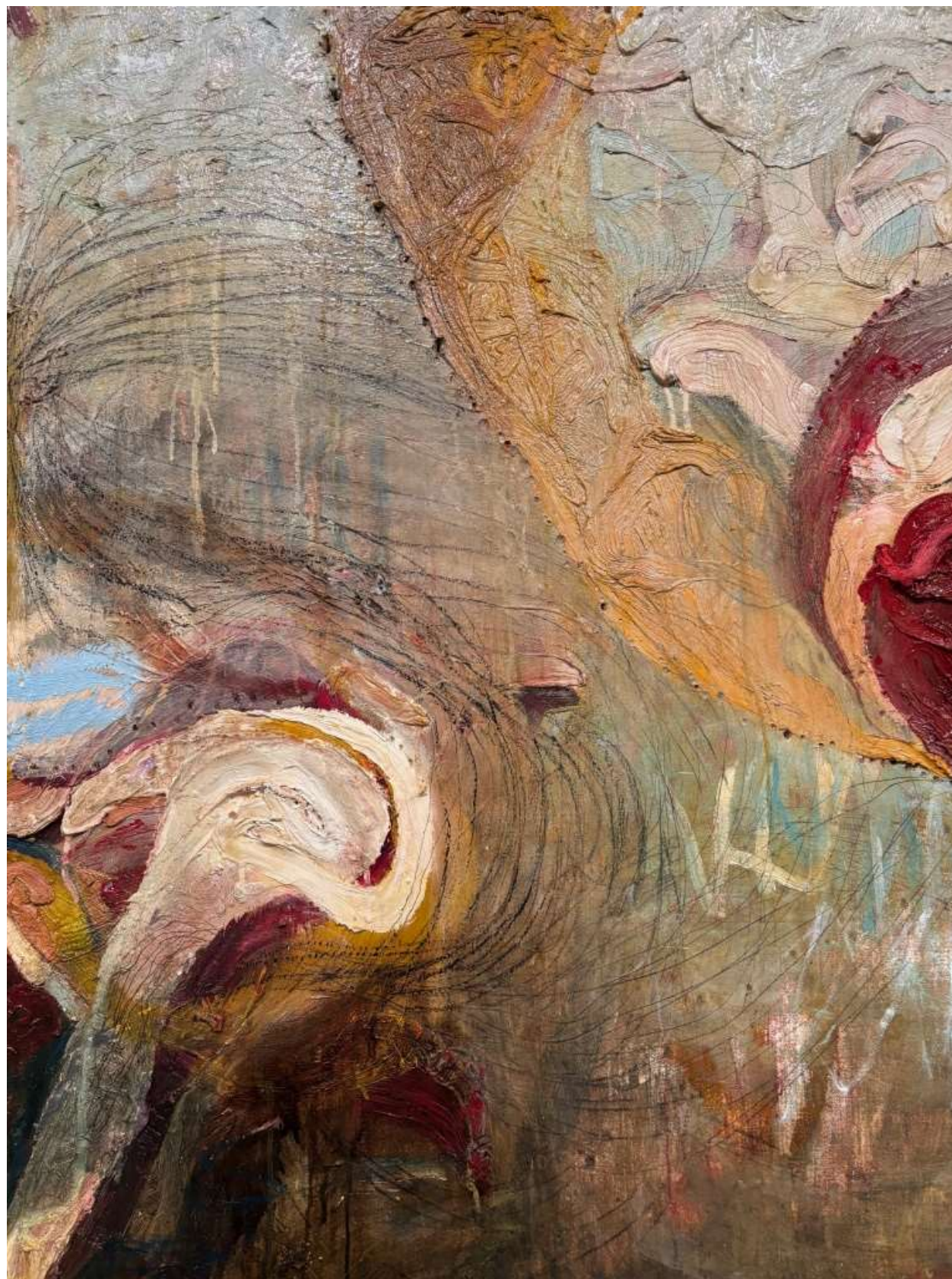
All but one of the paintings, given by long-time collector John Raimondi, were done between 1989 and 1995, and were inspired by and often named for waterways in South Carolina. Most are smallish, and while these are very good, several large paintings are truly outstandingly overwhelming.

Rutenberg grew up in Myrtle Beach, went to the College of Charleston, then in 1997 to the School of the Visual Arts in New York. He's lived in New York since, but his work remains grounded in the water, earth and sky of South Carolina. He's best known for large, colorful landscape-inspired works where the paint is often piled high. The Sumter Gallery show consisted of those paintings, done between 2016 and 2022. (Scroll down to May 1 to read a review and see images of that show).

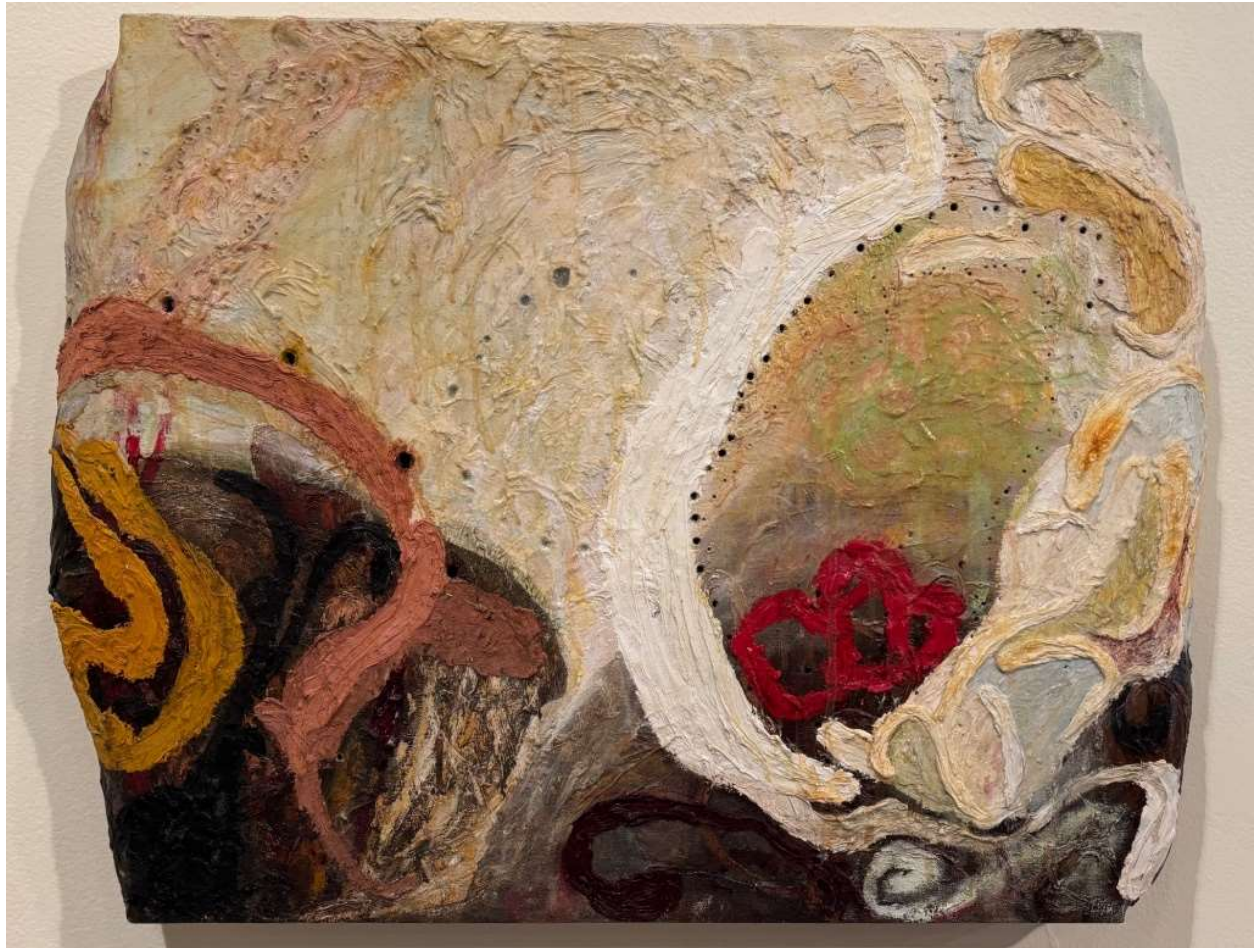
Many museums have shown Rutenberg's art and it's in the collection of many, but his first museum exhibition was in 1993 in the basement gallery of the Greenville Museum. That's where I first saw his art, first met and interviewed him, and first wrote about him and his art. Since then, I've seen a lot of his work, and wrote about it often during my years as a journalist. Two of the paintings in the current show were in that first Greenville Museum show and the others are from the same period so similar in approach. They've stood the test of time well.

The smallest and earliest works in the exhibition reveal an artist pushing the medium and himself. Like all his work to today, the paint is piled up in places but there are many delicate marks and often areas that are quite open. As in his current paintings, passages can feel gawky and colors muddy, but in a compelling, exciting way of someone doing serious exploration. In some of these, the canvases are also shaped, with the sides bulging as if they cannot be contained like the waters of a creek, and others have holes poked in them like raindrops on water or fish rising, but also nothing so simple.

The larger paintings, *Spring* and *September* from *Four Last Songs* (1993-1995), are a revelation. I saw Rutenberg's art of this period around the time they were made as well as years later; these remind me of why I got so excited about his art in the first place.



There is so much going on. Eddies and little whirlpools, sky and sunlight filtering through and reflecting off water and rock, light being swallowed by the water. Of course it's all just paint, paint that is blood red and clay red, with patches of aqua and sky blue contrasting with deep blues and nearly black corners. Slinking through the paint are pencil lines like bending reeds or river grass, but also longitude and latitude lines of maps (detail right). These paintings give a micro and macro experience; are we looking from a satellite or through a microscope?



Two paintings in this show were in the 1993 museum exhibition with one, *Saluda #4*, 1991 (right), purchased by the Greenville Museum then. Until the recent donation, it was the only Rutenberg painting in the museum collection. This seems so odd considering the museum hosted his first museum show. It's just as peculiar that this donation didn't end up at a museum that already owns a significant number of the artist's paintings. The art world is mysterious and the Greenville Museum particularly puzzling.

Along with the early pieces the museum now owns, the donation also included *Green River*, a 5-by-12-foot painting from 2014, which is much more like his current paintings and

provides context in the exhibition. I'm guessing the museum will be filling in the gaps to have a more complete representation of Rutenberg's career.

The exhibition does not yet have a closing date, but the museum has a tendency to move quickly and without much warning, so don't dawdle. If you saw the Sumter Gallery show and see this show you'll have had a great experience of this great artist in his home state and in a very short time frame. And if you've been a fan of or only familiar with Rutenberg's art from the past 20 or so years, you owe it to yourself to see where it started.

William H. Johnsons added to the Greenville collection

Although I was at the museum to see Rutenberg's paintings, I was almost as excited to see ["Art for Greenville"](#) which is made up of art the museum has purchased also a took to raise money for art acquisitions. These new acquisitions include 11 works by William H. Johnson, a native of Florence, S.C., who after years of neglect gained great attention starting in the 1990s. One of the first large exhibitions of Johnson I saw was at the Greenville Museum in a show organized by the Smithsonian Museum of American Art (which owns 1,500 Johnson works) in the late 1990s.



Volda Fjord, late 1930s.

These Johnson works include several important paintings from his years in Europe; I was shocked to see that paintings like these were still available to purchase and am happy to see they've ended up back in his home state.

Learn more about supporting art purchases for the museum – [Art for Greenville](#)