

PortlandTribune

Art happens here

Studio tour offers a view of creativity in action

BY JOSEPH GALLIVAN

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If art is the soul of a city, then seeing artists at work in their studios is like smelling the breath of a city.

There is a legion of Portland artists toiling away, mostly in home studios, many without exclusive gallery representation, and once a year, for the viewer, opportunity knocks. It's a chance to discover artists outside the system.

Portland Open Studios is a citywide art crawl – on two successive weekends on each side of the Willamette River – that allows anyone with the price of admission to obtain a map and be invited into the homes, garages and lofts where 98 Portland artists make their work.

Here are four such artists.

Chris Knight

Chris Knight works in the abandoned office of a truckers' gas station in the inner east side. Paintings are layered three deep against the walls, while books and art supplies cover every flat surface.

He has only 200 square feet and a tiny sink, but after a day of teaching at Portland and Clackamas community colleges, this is his refuge.

Seattle-born Knight, 35, makes magical, realist paintings that are a deliberate mix of styles, from messy gestures to sparse line work. Knight has a healthy disrespect for conventions: Although a generous fellowship through Vassar College means he could afford better quality materials, he deliberately paints with the cheapest acrylics on Luan plywood so he can work large and overpaint all he wants. (Lately he's been painting on a bunch of theater sets he fished out of a Clackamas Community College Dumpster.)

His heroes are "painterly" painters, such as Monet and Van Gogh. Living painters he admires include Kerry James Marshall, Neo Rauch and Luc Tuymans.

At work, he gets the kids to study Renaissance classics and paint triptychs.

"What they want to do is draw anime and dragons and skulls," he says with a laugh. "They want to learn how to draw and have it be fun, but learning to draw is work."

Knight spends his time thrashing out symbolism, design and composition. Finish is very much secondary. Lately he's been painting images of ships like marionettes, dangling from strings.

Ask him what a picture means and he says: "I intentionally set out not to know."

One painting is done like a page of comics, but with the panels in the wrong order. He describes one



SARAH TOOR / PORTLAND TRIBUNE

During the Portland Open Studios tour, Shu-Ju Wang, a former high-tech engineer, will show the intricate art books she makes as well as paintings and prints. She'll demonstrate the Print Gocco printer she uses, allowing visitors to make some art of their own.

narrative by hopscotching around the panels, but he says viewers could come up with their own.

“There’s not a single way into it. The dream is you understand that and can figure it out,” Knight says. “I want the viewer to get there. What I think the paintings mean is irrelevant at the end of the day.”

Knight the philosophy student will be right there in the studio to discuss it.

Shu-Ju Wang

Shu-Ju Wang had an unusual geographical intervention in her upbringing: She was born in Taiwan, and when she was 15, in 1974, her parents moved to Saudi Arabia.

Since she didn’t have a school to go to, they shipped her off to San Francisco, to stay with “quote-unquote friends of my father” – that is, a woman whom her father had met for about 15 minutes once on a ferry to Angel Island.

It all worked out in the end, though – Wang had a great career as a firmware engineer, quit to become a full-time artist and now lives happily in Southwest Portland. Wang has made some exquisite miniature art books using her experiences of immigration, but her main work is as a painter and printer.

For prints she works with the Print Gocco, a Japanese toy made by a company called Riso. It’s a simple way to learn screen-printing, as it uses premade screens mounted on cardboard.

She draws on it in charcoal, and the emulsion is activated with a flash of light. Using Riso’s oil-based ink, Wang makes one pass at a time to lay down one color. The prints dry on shelves in her guest room.

In one image she drew a horse, cranked up the contrast in Photoshop, and printed it on a laser printer, which has a carbon toner (Sharpies and gel pens also have carbon-based inks). She has also experimented with reusing Print Gocco screens with artist’s glue and stencils. During the open studios weekend, she’ll demonstrate the printer, allowing visitors to make a two-color print.

“It’s a real crowd-pleaser, the demo,” says Wang, who often hears that people try to buy the hard-to-find Print Goccos online.

Wang paints harmonious, symbolic works in gouache (a reworkable, opaque watercolor) on paper. They take about 50 hours each to do.

“I went through my Asia clip art book looking for images to paint,” she says, in all seriousness.

She interweaves imagery she culls from the news, includes collage items and also formulated her own symbols, such as the moth for vanity and the dandelion for folly (it being so easy to pull).

Again, even with the artist hovering, interpretation is in the eye of the beholder.

“I want people to come and make up stories of their own, but if they do ask I will tell them what I mean,” Wang says.

Don Griffith

The dot on the eastern edge of the Portland Open Studios map marks Don Griffith’s Happy Valley home. Here, in his spacious sun room with a view over the green hills of suburbia, you can see what a retired orthodontist can achieve.

Griffith’s work is proudly representational. He bases his colored pencil drawings on photos. One recent morning he was working on a small drawing of Shasta, his pet Siberian husky who died last year at age 16, applying small, neat marks to black paper.

Other prints sit in a rotating display rack, images of native Americans, Clint Eastwood and Maasai people he photographed while on a monthlong safari in Kenya in 2003.

Griffith scans his drawings and prints them on an Epson 1800 color inject printer. He sculpts, too, working in clay, which he fires in a small kiln. For more detailed work (that won’t sag), he works in wax, which he warms in a pot under a heat lamp.

The complex work, such as a Maasai scout tracking a lion, or a Maasai woman wearing a traditional necklace, is cast in bronze at a foundry, in editions of five or 10.

His younger son's snowboarding has inspired him to sculpt snowboarding figures. The bronze is sprayed with acid to give it an icy blue, almost marbled look. A few animals dot the room – parrots, lions – but they're not his best work.

“When I'm doing the serious stuff, I focus on the human anatomy,” he says.

“It's been a hobby for 30 years,” Griffith says of his art practice as a grandchild scampers in from the swing set outside.

Art has occupied him about four hours a day since he retired in 2004. As an orthodontist, he has great knowledge of facial anatomy, but he's also taken community college art classes to understand his materials.

“I've exhausted the classes there, and now I go to Pacific Northwest College of Art (in Northwest Portland). They seem to have a little more detailed instruction than some of the community colleges.”

Heather Leklem

Heather Leklem is a holdout. A young holdout.

She shoots her photography exclusively on film, the way she was taught in college, and rents space at U-Develop to make her own color prints. No chips, no software – just chemicals, a clock and chance.

She photographs nature scenes, in places such as Vernonia and on the Sandy River, combining her love of hiking with photography. Waterfalls and wet, leafy trails are her specialty. Within that she has her “watercolor” series: These look like abstract paintings made up of soft colored shapes that are actually the close-up reflections of sky and leaves on water.

Leklem, 30, got a bachelor's degree in fine art from Pacific Northwest College of Art in 2001. By day, she's a professional picture framer, and for the east-side Portland Open Studios she'll be demonstrating custom matting.

Her studio is typical Portland: down the wooden stairs, past the washer-dryer and into a small, windowless room. She's organized: Cameras line the shelves, framing gear hangs on walls, and matted photos sit in racks as though in a store.

She's a big fan of the painter Mark Rothko, and her photography heroes are Ansel Adams, Richard Misrach and, locally, Larry Olson (whose studio also is part of the east-side tour).

“I love finding the colors in the water,” she says. “I'm not so much into the big vista as the close-up – insects and flowers. The best way I express myself is with the colors.”

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