

THOM REAVES'  
**STUDIO TOUR** MAGAZINE  
THE ARTISTS BEHIND THE ART

**Thomas Kelly: Celebrating the Nuances of Everyday Life.**

May 28, 2016

By Thom Reaves



It was at the 1st Annual Pork Roll Festival in Trenton, NJ where I had the pleasant opportunity to meet Thomas Kelly; an artist from Hamilton, New Jersey, whose work I've admired for some time.

His work seems to look at places all of us know; situations that seem somehow familiar, but with freshness and vibrancy. So, it was with great pleasure that I asked him to be the first interview for Studio Tour Magazine and he accepted.

So, who is Thomas Kelly and what makes him tick? Here are Thomas' answers to the questions we'd like to know about.



*STM: Thank you for taking the time to meet with us, Thomas.*

*So, What is the reason for art?*

TK: I do not shoot for a reason in my art. Art is to me is basically different ways for people to express themselves and relate to others. Music, writing, theater and visual art are amongst the ways we use to relate to each other. Today's artists continue this age old practice of sharing your feelings and what interests you with others.

*STM: What meaning does art have in your life and how did that meaning develop?*

TK: At this point the meaning is about the process and the end result. I love the process of making the art. Starting with a true germ of an idea and taking generic materials of paint and canvas and ending with a meaningful, memorable image is very gratifying.

*STM: What are you intending to communicate with your art?*

TK: The communication of my art is that we are all in this together. I try to relay the way I see and feel about things in a way that the viewer can feel a commonality to the image, space, time, story or figures. I think why my art is so easily approached is that I see what everyone else sees. I just maybe tend to notice different things and celebrate the smaller nuances of everyday life.

***STM: Tell me about your creative process.***

TK: My method could not get simpler. I have an idea, think about it for a hundred years and then I paint it. Seriously, I keep a notebook/log/list of ideas, titles and drawings. From that I keep a short list of the next 5-6 paintings I wish to complete. Then I stick to it. I don't chicken out or quit halfway through. That is a trap, quitting because the painting is not going well or easily, to start another, "easier" one. I get back in there finish every painting, and it truly does work out.

My tiny original sketch can usually be overlaid right onto the finished painting. That is how close I stick to the original idea. That is what I wish to portray, that raw sketch is what first fascinated me.

Of course on commissioned work the process is a little different but the thinking about the drawing/image is still the crucial part. The idea is the hardest part of the painting for me.





***STM: Some people may ask, "Aren't oils the paint of "serious artists?" Why acrylic?***

TK: The colors of acrylic and oil paints are both the same. The way I work, quickly, in washes and constantly correcting, suits acrylic paints well. I know many artists despise acrylics because of the short working time, but I find this attribute makes me more focused.

*STM: Where do you create your work? Is it a dedicated studio or makeshift one?*

TK: I have a good sized studio in my house. It is upstairs and has ample room. It is terrific that most of the work is collected and there are not too many paintings in the studio with me.

*STM: Do you have grander plans for your studio, or is it optimal for what your art entails?*

TK: For now it is perfect. I don't have to commute. I can see the work in progress at different times during the day and in different lights.

If I get any large scale commissions (always open to this) I will find the space to work on them.











***STM: Do you think art should address social issues?***

TK: I think art is a terrific way to address social issues. Many, many memorable pieces are directed at social issues.

***STM: Do you ever use your art in this way? What issues are important to you?***

TK: It is not my way to address social issues. This was not how I began and what I stayed with. I have great respect for artists who put social issues in the forefront and get the word out on their beliefs and thoughts on society. I few pieces I made as a student were in this vein, but I don't believe they were my path.

***STM: Many people, sometimes even artists themselves have the view that the starving artist's image is true. Do you find that to be so?***

TK: I think it is absolutely true. Artists can be starving to find their path, their style and their voice. They can starve for attention, acceptance and validation. They can starve for press coverage and venues to show their work. They can starve for a champion, such as a dealer, curator or collector.

Regarding the romantic artist languishing away with no food or money for studio space or material to make art with? That is a beautiful myth. Artists that I know are amongst the hardest working people you will find. They will find a way. They will work seven jobs. They will teach, they will work outside their field, they will do whatever they need to do to provide for themselves and their families. They will still make their art, and that is romantic!

***STM: What bearing does this view have on your efforts in an artistic career?***

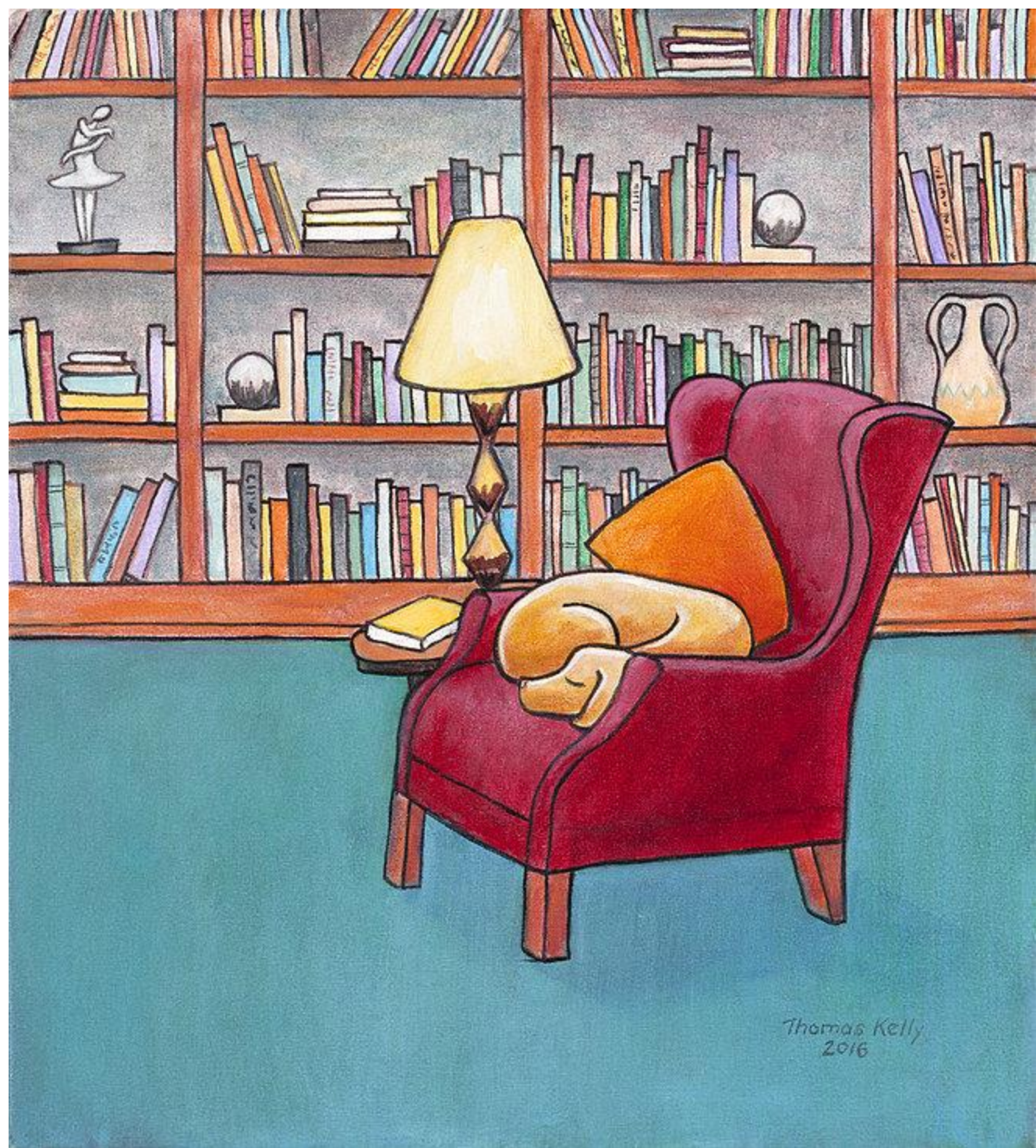
TK: I think it takes special people with a tenacious attitude to be artists. I think we are all workers with a vision. There are many facets to get the work done, shown, marketed and collected. The

artist must wear a lot of hats and be able to perform a lot of different skills.

*STM: Did you find it to be relatively easy to get to where you are now in your art career?*

TK: Nothing is easy in the art world. I was told that an artist needs the hide of a rhinoceros, the tenaciousness of a bulldog, and a warm place to come home to. I think I have all three. I was blessed with starting late, in my late twenties, which helped me develop my own style. Viewers would comment that, "Your work reminds me of a specific artist". I would have to go and look the artist up. I really had no idea of Art History. I was not trying to emulate anyone's work. It was during this time that I found my own voice and style.





Thomas Kelly  
2016

***STM: How have you struggled? Or what have been your greatest obstacles?***

TK: I was blessed with early mentoring and some early success, which was huge. I find artists, teachers and many connected in the arts to be tremendously nurturing to young artists. The young artists who need guidance just have to listen a little bit. Luckily I was a blank sheet and coachable. The Trenton (NJ) Artist Workshop Association was instrumental in giving me confidence to show my work, and guidance on how to promote the work to be seen. With a TAWA invitational I was given an entire gallery for a solo show at the Trenton City Museum. This was in 1998. I showed twenty paintings, the work got terrific reactions; terrific press and we even sold a couple of pieces. From the Trenton Museum show, I was also blessed to find a dealer early on, who loved the work and was a true champion of both the work and the artist. This was C.J. Mugavero of The Artful Deposit Gallery in Bordentown. She took me into her stable and promoted the work. With her support I flourished and prepared for my second solo show in 1999. The show went well and we were off.

***STM: How have your struggles affected your work?***

TK: The struggle for me was finding the time to paint with a full time, non-art job and raising a family. We went from zero to 3 kids in 14 months, starting in 2001. My son was born two days after 9/11 and our twin girls the next year. It was awesome, painting with two or three babies sleeping in swinging chairs in my studio. When I have limited time, I tend to be more disciplined and focused on painting.

Having a full time job lets me paint whatever I like. I don't have to worry about whether anyone else will appreciate it. It is very freeing. I do paint commissions, quite a lot recently. They are a little bit different because they are in collaboration with the collector, but I still hold true to my vision. That is what the patrons were looking for originally.

*STM: On occasion, people who are not artists may ask questions which artists sometimes feel are not appropriate, like “Do you make a living from your art?” or questions not easily answered, like “How long did that take you to make?”. How do you feel about those types of questions? How do you answer them?*

TK: These questions do not bother me. Being asked questions is nice, as it means people are interested in you and your work. They are curious about the romanticized life of an artist. I have had people who ask the most “intrusive” questions become collectors. If people ask you to paint something out of your style or range, don't be insulted, be excited. They are trying to hire you! You just need to agree on the project. They are really complimenting you and your work.

I also think these types of questions may bother artists because they force us to look at ourselves objectively. We are doing a little self-examination and do not always like what we see. The question poser is sometimes more honest than we are.

*STM: Money, fame, notoriety; Artists always have something they want. What do you want?*



TK: I just like the ability to get the work out there. Good things will come if you work hard, maintain creativity, and work well with people.

***STM: Do you consider yourself to be succeeding in getting this and why?***

TK: We are lucky enough to say that something like 80% of my paintings are collected. There are more than 200 pieces in people's collections. So I think we are on the right path. We are connecting with galleries outside of this central NJ area and are getting a good response. We are blessed with at least 50 collectors who own more than one painting. We are succeeding in getting the work out there. It is a long road, but a very satisfying road.

***STM: I notice you sometimes use the word 'we' when referring to your art. Who are the 'we' and do you feel your artwork is a collaboration of sorts?***

TK: I say we a lot not just about art. The "We" is the team that we surround ourselves with in our lives. At work and with co-workers, at home with family or in the arts with dealers, curators, fellow artists and collectors, much of what we do is a team effort. I could have never made the art I do today without many people

extending themselves with support. A kind word, a recommendation, a commission are a few of the ways that people help lift me up. I like to show the paintings while in progress and “We”, friends and family will give a sharp critique. Don’t be an artist if this type of thing will upset you. The “We” is an indispensable attribute that all in the arts do need. The ‘We” both lifts us up and keeps us grounded.

***STM: What was your biggest setback or failure? Where did it take you?***

TK: There have really not been huge surprises in the art world for me. There have been happy surprises on the positive side. Surprises like you reaching out and asking for this interview. It forced me to put down my thoughts at this stage of my career and hopefully garner some new viewers to the work.

***STM: What’s working for you in your artistic career/endeavors? Is there anything not working?***

TK: I love the gallery system where dealers put their expertise to work and get the paintings out there. Their belief in the work and the artists are always very inspiring. Their endorsement and placing of work with interested collectors is an invaluable necessity. I could have never gotten far without such a support system.

We have always had a super support network of champions. The dealers, curators, arts writers and press, fellow artists, collectors

and friends are always quick to share an idea, lend a hand or present an opportunity. I cannot thank them enough.

***STM: To what other activities have your creative abilities taken you?***

TK: My next project is to finish the two books I have been trying to get out for a few years. The books are based on artist's talks which I have given over the years to schools, colleges and arts groups. The first is titled 100 Rules for the Aspiring Painter. It has a sister book, 100 Rules of Art for Kids (and Their Parents). These are upbeat, fun to read books with all "dos" and no "don'ts". The books are broken into 5 sections; Composition, Control (Technique), Color, Contemplations (How to Think) and Civilities (How to Act). There are chapters such as Save Everything, There is No Wrong Cloud and Become a Postcard Guerrilla.

The kid's book begins with You Are Good Enough, and has chapters for the kids and some for their parents. Some of the parent chapters are: Help Them with Their Art Homework Too! , and Buy them Good Materials and Learn a Little About Art Yourself.

I had a literary agent for a while who almost had the books sold, so I know it is viable. I just need to finish the illustrations and shop it again. I have been blessed with a knowledgeable group of literary advisers, who have been supportive, helpful and think the books will fly.

***STM: Although you said you had no training in art history and that you started late, your book plans reveal that you believe art education***

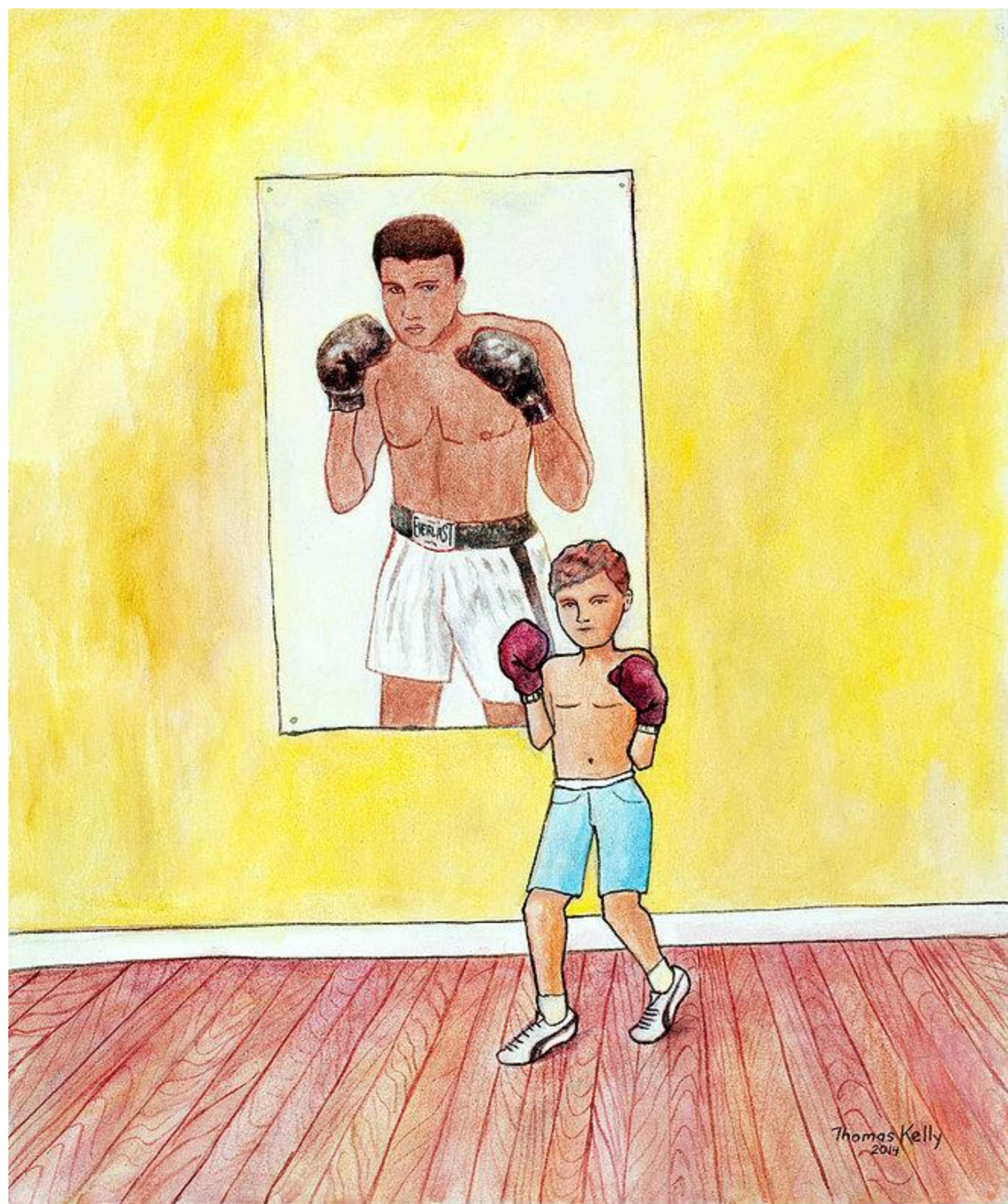


*to be important. Do you think that all children should be educated in art or only those who show an aptitude for it?*

TK: I think the state does the job to start Art in grade school and wean the student from Art by high school. The weaning away is the part I do not understand. Then, by college Art is thought to be an “easy” class that can fulfill an elective toward your major program. The funny part is the college Art class is not “easy!” Fun yes, but it is not easy.

Of course all children should be educated in the arts, music, stage etc. We wish to have well rounded citizens, don’t we?

My daughters go to Saint Raphael’s School in Hamilton. Every student grade 5 through 8, a lot of kids, just participated in the school play, Cinderella. It was phenomenal. There was no elective, it was mandatory, and the kids grasped it and did a wonderful job. The kids loved it and it was wonderful. So yes, all school children should be immersed in the arts. The ones who will excel are the ones who stick to it. This is the same in every endeavor.



***STM: Do you think high school students should be encouraged to pursue art careers as a viable option to make a living or keep it as a secondary pursuit in their professional lives?***

TK: This one will be up to the kids, and their parents. If your kid is a terrific anything, can they make a living of it? Will they have to compromise their vision to sell and earn a living? There is no shame in working at an earning job and pursuing your art, music or writing on the side. When the art earnings reach half the mainstream earnings a decision has to be made.

***STM: Looking back on everything you've done, is there anything you're most proud of?***

TK: When I finish a painting or a series or really any project, I really feel it is the best I can do. That is why I have stopped on the piece. I do not look back and wish I could have done more. When I see a piece in a collectors home or business, it is like seeing an old friend, and is very comforting. I am happy to see that the work holds up, and is fun to see in person. It is nice to see the work full size, instead of on a postcard or computer screen.

***STM: As an artist, what do you want your legacy to be; to the art world; to the next generation, or in any area after you?***

TK: I have thought long about my artist's statement recently as I have been reaching out to new arenas. I am not and do not wish to be the artist with the best technical skill, recreating realism that wows the masses. I wish to be the one who connects well with the way people feel. I wish to have the viewer say about themselves, when they see my art, "This is about me, this is about my life." This is how I wish to connect. The feedback given from collectors who absolutely had to have a piece because it meshed so well with their lives is truly extraordinary. The personal insight viewer's offer could not be gained by a landscape, still life or portrait. The universal feelings we all have is what I am trying to portray.

*STM: What do you want people to know about artists?*

TK: I wish people to know that everyone is an artist, or can be. It is not a mystery as some artists profess. I can teach you all how to paint in a weekend. It is up to the taught, to stick with it and make the art their own. Keep painting and you will get better. I promise.

We all learn art in grade school and then shy away as we get older. Hopefully we can all appreciate art and have some originals in our homes and spaces where we spend a lot of time. Art really does enhance our lives. It need not be expensive to be uplifting or engaging.

*STM: Who is Thomas Kelly? What is the one thing you want people to know about you?*



TK: I am a hardworking, blue collar painter from New Jersey. Work hard and good things will come. I am able to live with any of my paintings because I paint what I know and paint what I love. Thanks for asking me to be interviewed. This was a lot of fun.

***STM: Where can people find you?***

TK: I am represented by:

The Artful Deposit Gallery

142 Farnsworth Avenue, Bordentown NJ 08505

609-298-6970

<http://artfuldeposit.blogspot.com/>

Gallerie Chiz in Pittsburgh, PA,

5831 Ellsworth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15232

412-441-6005

[www.galleriechiz.com](http://www.galleriechiz.com)

The Bethlehem House Gallery

459 Main Street, Bethlehem, PA

(610) 419-6262

[www.bethlehemhousegallery.com](http://www.bethlehemhousegallery.com)

Website: [www.thomaskelly.net](http://www.thomaskelly.net)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/thomaskellyart/](http://www.facebook.com/thomaskellyart/)

Instagram: [www.instagram.com/thomaskellyart/](http://www.instagram.com/thomaskellyart/)

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/thomaskellyart](http://www.twitter.com/thomaskellyart)

***STM: Do you have a book of your work for sale?***

TK: I will get one to you, Thom!!

***STM: Thank you again for participating, Thomas!***