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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

Reprinted from the March 27, 2013, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

Common Scenes and Everyday Life at Chapin

by Ilene Dube

Whether he's painting or writing, Tom Kelly is telling stories. Even when he gives directions to his home, there's a story element. "Turn left when you get to the big tree."

He hasn't yet painted Hamilton Township's big tree, but he has painted the Mercer Oak. Leafless, it sits in a field of snow, surrounded by its split-rail fence. But the big tree in the middle of Quakerbridge Road is on his list.

Kelly keeps a notebook of everything he wants to paint. This way, when he finishes a painting, there's never any doubt about where he wants to go next. "I keep a short list of five or six so I never get block. You made the list when you were of sound mind, so stick to the list," he advises himself. The notebook dates back to 1999 and may include a sketch or a one-line description that will jog his memory. "They're all done in my mind; I just have to fill in the details," he says.

After he's made the painting, he puts a star next to the description. Not every note makes it into the notebook — sometimes they wind up in a pocket or the dryer, or the back of a Far Side calendar.

Kelly is seeking a publisher for his book, "One Hundred Rules for the Aspiring Painter," based on a series of lectures he gave to the Allentown Art Guild, Ellarslie, Princeton Rotary, and other organizations. It includes sections on composition, techniques and color, but it also includes such chapters as "How to Think" and "How to Behave."

"Go to openings and introduce yourself," he says. "Be a groupie at art shows. Schmooze. Be available." As an example, he cites the time the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra asked him to paint a violin for an auction. By day, Kelly works as production supervisor for KNF Neuberger, a vacuum pump company in Trenton. At the time his twin daughters and a son were infants. But he managed create the time to paint a landscape on the instrument for the fundraiser, which gave him visibility for other projects.

Some of the images from Kelly's notebook can be seen in the exhibition "All I Have Learned, Until Now," paintings by Thomas Kelly, on view at the Gallery at Chapin from Monday, April 1, through Tuesday, April 30, with a reception Wednesday, April 3, from 5 to 7 p.m.

"My paintings are of common scenes and everyday occurrences in which people struggle to establish and maintain relationships," he says in his artist statement. "It is these universal emotions and situations that most interest me."

When people look at his paintings, they smile, observes C.J. Mugavero, owner of the Artful Deposit Gallery in Bordentown, which represents Kelly. "There is a realm of reprieve with his work. It isn't complicated, yet it is complex. It seems to take people on an immediate journey, evoking a memory or a story."

The artist encourages viewers to participate in the narrative and form their own stories. "I don't like to speak about my paintings," he says. "It ruins them."

Nevertheless, when asked about the line in his notebook that preceded the genesis of "Put on Your Fake Face for Dinner," he is cajoled into a brief description. "At a dinner party, something was going on, and everyone was keeping up appearances." A group of four sits around a large round table with red plates. The room is spare, with an accordion pleated lamp hanging over the table and a large green floral rug. Kelly carefully composes his interiors, as well as his



'The Tool Collector'

characters' attire. Three of the four diners hold a white mask with a smile over their faces, while the fourth diner eats from his plate.

Kelly always starts with a simple sketch. "Painting the Room in Her Own Colors" shows a man in a business suit holding a briefcase stealing out of the house in the blue of the night. Seen through the picture window, a woman — presumably his wife — stands on a ladder, rolling pink paint over the living room.

"Save all your drawings," Kelly says, both in his book and to students. "You have plenty of room in your drawers and under the bed. When I tell this to kids, the teachers look at me like I'm crazy."

He has been spending time lately at Hamilton's McGalliard School, where he was commissioned to paint a series "Cool Down Fish." The brightly colored 45-by-30-foot fish path incorporates the pillars of character: respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, trust, and citizenship. It is a calming tool for students as they walk through the spiral. Other schools have since commissioned him to paint one on their blacktop.

When he was first invited to discuss the project with the principal, they sat in little chairs. One can picture a future painting: *They Sat in Little Chairs*.

As part of the project, Kelly met with students, discussing how math and history are all part of art making. "They all raise their hands when I ask who wants to be an artist," he says. "Then I show them how you need math to measure the size of your work, you need science to mix the chemicals in your paint, and you have to study what other artists did before you, history. Kids have a million questions. 'Are you painting as fast as you can?'"

After the fish was finished, Kelly's own children — now 10 and 11 — came and gave it their seal of approval.

Kelly started painting in 1993 when he was 30. The story he tells is, he bought a house in Chambersburg and made a few works of sculpture for it. His sister suggested he take classes, and so he went to Mercer County Community College and took watercolor and printmaking. One of his teachers, Terry McNichol, suggested he enter the 10-by-10 show at Artworks. Not only was he accepted, but he was written up by Jan Purcell in the Times of Trenton. Bolstered, he continued taking one class a semester for 10 years with Mel Leipzig, Jimmy Colavita, Michael Welliver, and Frank Rivera, among others. He earned an associate's degree in fine arts in 1997.

Soon he found himself vice president of the Trenton Artists Workshop Association, and was given one gallery at Ellarslie to show his work.

"Be a postcard guerrilla," is one of his tenets. He sent a postcard to C.J. Mugavero at the Artful Deposit. She came to the show and invited him to her gallery for a look. In a 1999 show at the Artful Deposit, 20 of his paintings sold.

"I thought, oh, this is easy," he says. "It's not, but it was a good time."

It continues to be a good time for Kelly. He estimates more than 40 collectors own more than one of his works. He keeps a spreadsheet of everything he's painted — of 240 completed, only 60 remain available. "People give me heck when they miss a painting," he says, so with partners he started a business, Fine Artists Prints, to print giclees and frame and ship them.

"People say, 'Isn't painting relaxing?' and you want to strangle them. Mel (Leipzig) used to say it's like war — you want to get what is in your head onto the canvas. It's a friendly war, but it's work." The 30 to 40 hours Kelly spends on a painting don't include the thinking time.

Many of his paintings focus on the tensions between a male and female figure. In "This is My Life," a woman is lying on the floor with an abacus, while a man sits in a chair behind her reading a book, a cat stretched out behind him. A cat slithers past in Kelly's living room.

In "The Iris Farmer," the husband is outside, watering his prize irises. His wife is inside, beside a vase of the flowers, holding a handful from which some have dropped to the floor. "It's about the personal interactions and how we get along," he says. "Maintaining a relationship is hard work. You're together with your family for a long time.

"And I love pattern, such as in the flowered wallpaper," he adds.

"Sunday Afternoon Pastime" also seems to be about the marital discord over gardening chores. The woman stands at the back door, holding open the screen, while the man sits at a table with beer and a radio, the rake on the ground. Kelly's parents?

"My father was a pharmacist and my mother was a nurse and a nurturer. She was always reading and big on theater and movies. My father was also a voracious reader, consuming five or six newspapers after church. He was a multi-tasker and would get us kids to do the yard work," says Kelly, who grew up in Hamilton

Just like the cats in Kelly's home, the lines of the chairs and sofas find their way onto his canvases.

In "Domino Players," dark-haired men sit at a card table, and cars on the street, just like his characters' clothes and furnishings, look slightly old-fashioned, perhaps from the 1950s, and yet timeless. The architecture looks like Chambersburg. "Paint what you know," says the Hamilton native. "Cezanne painted out his window."

In another, men wear top hats and striped pants as they swing their arms while walking on a city street with matching awnings over all the windows.

The painting "71 Eldorado" shows a man standing on the back of a convertible, holding roses while looking at a woman — the love of his life? — standing on the beach. "I always drove bombers," he says. In "First Car," a young man sits on a curb glancing at his white sedan with a red interior. In the foreground, the manhole cover is inscribed TWW for Trenton Water Works. A yellow path leads from the yellow house with a diamond-shaped window on the white door to the street. "It's more about the feeling of a first car," he says. "You clean it, adjust the stereo — it's a very intimate relationship. Everyone can rattle off their experience with their first car."

Color is the last choice, he says. "You need a good composition to get started."

Many of the paintings are of party scenes, with couples dancing. A woman in a green evening gown and a man in a suit are dancing in the background of a living room while in the foreground, on a table, a pair of fancy pumps sit under a lamp on a table. "Shoes on the Table (There's Going to be a Fight)" is part of his Superstitions series. "People are adamant that there will be discord," he says.

So, since the title of his show is "All I Have Learned, Until Now," just what has he learned?

First, keep at it (you have to work, no one works at your painting while you're gone). Second, plan ahead. And third, you have to be happy with your work; hang it in your own home and love it — that's what makes it honest.

All I Have Learned, Until Now, paintings by Thomas Kelly, Gallery at Chapin, the Chapin School, 4101 Princeton Pike, Princeton, April 1 through 30. Reception Wednesday, April 3, 5 to 7 p.m. Free. The exhibit can be viewed by appointment during school hours between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. 609-924-7206.

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