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ARTISTS AT HOME

*Studios
open
to the art
patron*

BY SANDRA KREISWIRTH
STAFF WRITER

Making art has always been a solitary process. The artist stands alone in his or her studio envisioning, creating, coaxing vision into form. In the past, the lucky ones delivered the fruits of their artistic labors either to a gallery, a museum or, in the case of a few, directly to a patron.

But times have changed. Now with traditional avenues of support for the visual arts decreasing in proportion to the growing numbers of artists in the Los Angeles area, alternative methods are being employed to put the artist and the art-buying public together.

Guide to Artists in Southern California (ART Resource Publications, \$16.95), the brainchild of sculptor Vanessa Obten, is one of those methods.

The book introduces 67 of L.A.'s top artists who work in assemblage, ceramic vessels, masks, mixed media, painting, photography, prints and sculpture

and invites you to visit them at their studios (by appointment only).

Painter Roland Reiss, mask maker Beckie Kravetz, political painter/poster maker Robbie Conal and sculptor Tanya Ragir are four of those artists.

Roland Reiss, born in Chicago during the Depression and raised in Pomona, is perhaps the most prominent of the four, having had the longest career as a painter, sculptor and teacher.

He established his reputation in the 1950s as an abstract expressionist before moving to sculpture in the '70s when he created boxed miniature tableau, which doubled as metaphors for varying themes of life.

Four years ago, he returned to painting. And, although it was a return to nonrepresentational work, it was a new challenge for several reasons. First, because he was leaving a form in which he had established an international reputation.

Second, because the abstract style of painting he turned to has lost its popularity over the years, more so in L.A. than in New York, according to

Reiss. Before making the change, the artist asked himself a single question: Could his new work be at the cutting edge of contemporary possibility?

"Your most authentic self is when you are facing unknown possibilities," he says, adding that for him, the pitfall would have been to merely return to the work he'd done years before.

Instead, Reiss says he's now speaking in a language of shape and color set off against each other. One critic described it as "nonsensical glyphs, imperfectly doubled blobs and wacky, meandering squiggles shamelessly theatrical yet refreshingly optimistic images."

"I'm blasting out with color," says Reiss. "I'm also getting a lot of letters from young artists." A piece of paper posted on a wall in his spacious downtown Los Angeles loft, which he shares with his wife and fellow painter, Dawn Arrowsmith, proves the point. It says "You have chosen the most difficult task. You have chosen to do what others have not done.

"That's what a young artist who came to my studio told me," Reiss says with a big smile. "It was a thrill to me. It tells me I'm right on."

To contact Reiss at his studio, call (213) 221-9066.

Beckie Kravetz arrived at mask-making the long way around.

She was a theater major in college, with an emphasis on acting. Although she pursued a career for a short time, the acting bug didn't have a long life. Still, Kravetz, born and raised in Arizona, wanted to stay in theater. So she pursued graduate work in theater history and literature at the Yale School of Drama.

Next, she enrolled in a master's class in dramaturgy at the same time volunteering to paint sets. Still not happy, she flipped through the Yale catalog and came upon a props-making class that included mask-making. And that was it. Actually, that was part of it. By year's end, Kravetz was making masks and doing hair, makeup and wigs.

That was in the mid-'80s. For the past eight years, she's been assistant wigmaster and a principal makeup artist for the Los Angeles Music Center Opera, where she is also a free-lance mask maker. But it's not the sound of arias that fill her Culver

City studio, rather the lyric strains of jazz pianist Bill Evans.

Even though Kravetz did not become an actor, her training as a performer has always been a major influence on her mask-making. Not only does she create the mask by wearing it, she considers its physical ramifications as well, explaining that a good mask actor responds to the shape of the mask, allowing it to also shape his or her own body.

Her gallery work is another story. For these masks, Kravetz uses organic materials such as branches, eggshells and seed pods. Often times she houses them in box environments she's made out of scraps of wood.

Her gallery work can also be a different interpretation of something she's done for the opera or theater, as is the case with a horse mask she's designed for a dance company. She's making a new horse mask this time, using delicate branches rather than clay and antique lace instead of feathers and leather.

ARTISTS AT HOME/D20

A R T

L I S T I N G S

Artists

Continued from D19

"As a person, I'm into nature," she says. "But theater is a huge, huge contradiction to that, big and glitzy. So my personal work is a synthesis and reconciliation of those two worlds."

To contact Kravetz at her studio, call 397-5813



Robbie Conal, whose studio is on the Westside, is the most controversial artist of the four because of the political nature of his work. He's the darling of the ACLU and a thorn in the side of conservatives and city officials.

A self-described art brat from Manhattan, he came west to do the hippie thing in the Haight Asbury in the '60s and to study at Stanford in the '70s.

It was a good look at Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in Rome in the '80s that gave him the inspiration and motivation to get serious about

his own work.

It took him five years to discover his signature style, which merged his art with his social/political conscience. Next he transferred his drawings and paintings to posters, which he and his band of merry pranksters armed with pots of glue and brushes slapped onto buildings in the dark of night first in L.A., then all over America.

Conal would hop a plane armed with rolled-up posters, land in his city of choice, meet his guerrilla army in an all-night coffee shop and hit the streets. "We were happening," he laughs.

In his stark/black-and-white portraits, Conal takes on anyone he considers a power abuser. Ronald Reagan and his cabinet, Oliver North, Margaret Thatcher and Daryl Gates to name a few.

No surprise then that the recent rise of House Speaker Newt Gingrich inspired Conal to whip out his "Newtwit"

poster, which has already had midnight plasterings. "Newtwit" almost painted itself," he says. "I just got into a zone."

Conal, whose wife is film graphics artist Deborah Ross, claims his work is nonpartisan. "Newt is Bill's evil twin," he says, adding he doesn't make the kind of art he does to change anyone's mind or vote. "I do it to needle these guys from the street level." For Conal, there doesn't seem to be any lack of subject: "There are so many bad guys and so little time," he says.

To contact Conal at his studio, call 915-0774.



Tanya Ragir is a California native, a wife, the mother of 5-year-old Sophie and 20-month-old Jonah and a full-time artist. But not to worry. She says she can do it all: She's a woman. Ironically, however, she says now that she signs her work T. Ragir rather than Tanya, her work is selling better.

She's also an artist whose passion is the figurative form despite the demise of its popularity over the past several decades.

Ragir, like Kravetz, took a circuitous route to the art she's making. Even though she received plenty of encouragement as an art

student in university, Ragir felt too vulnerable to the criticism that came with showing one's work.

So she began a commercial career as a mannequin sculptor and is considered one of the best in the world.

By 1990, however, she slowly began sculpting again. By that time, she says she no longer had her self-worth tied up with her creativity. But far from apologizing for her commercial work, she views it as a process through which she refined her skills: a sort of technical apprenticeship. Something she still keeps her hand in, both because she likes it and because it helps to pay the hefty costs involved in sculpting in resin and bronze.

Looking back on her lifelong love affair with making art, she remembers something her parents told her when she was a teen-ager. Her father, an industrial designer, suggested, "Maybe you should become a dental technician since you're so good with your hands."

Her mother, a concert pianist, countered, "Do what you love, and the money will come."

To contact Ragir at her Westside studio, call 398-6004.

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