

Ojai

living the
ojai life

FALL 2010

THE HOUSE THAT LIBBEY BUILT
ANDY WARHOL'S OJAI CONNECTION
THE BELLWOOD CHRONICLES
AN ACTOR'S MANY LIVES



FREE

the art of ojai
ISSUE

Ojai Interview: Khaled Al-Awar
Favorite Places: Bart's Books



intro:

Here's what I like about Ojai — there is a painter or potter down every lane.

The place is teeming with artists. Besides painters and potters, we have artists who work in metal, glass, mosaic, fiber, wood, stone, precious gems, silver and gold. Somewhere down a bucolic country road there may even be someone making art out of dryer lint.

Of course, all are not full-time creative folks. Lots have day jobs to support their dream (your sommelier may have an MFA). But others are truly successful, prominent regionally and nationally, and some are known internationally. Their work appears regularly in major arts and craft publications. The newest cathedral in Los Angeles features tapestries by Ojai artist John Nava; the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. exhibits ceramics by the late Beatrice Wood and Vivika and Otto Heino; and museums around the world continue to showcase and collect Ojai artists and artisans.

We count ourselves lucky to see their work in progress. They count

themselves lucky to live in a collegial arts community (also including writers, actors and musicians) that is receptive and stimulating.

Since 1984, legions of artists have been given visibility by the Ojai Studio Artists Tour, coming Oct. 9 and 10. This juried event (participants' work is vetted) offers thousands of visitors a behind-the-scenes look at artists' homes or studios, a chance to meet the artist and, often, to see a work in progress.

This year, there are 57 artists on the tour. Following are profiles of six who work in various media.



Clockwise from top:
Cindy Pitou Burton
Bruce Tomkinson
Jennifer Moses
Rex Kochel
Ray Harding
Carlos Grasso

"Art enables us to find ourselves and to lose ourselves at the same time."

- Thomas Merton



Ojai Artists

by Laura Peck

photos by Cindy Pitou
Burton

a painter or potter down every lane

Bruce Tomkinson, the art of travel

An eleventh-hour epiphany led Bruce Tomkinson to a lifetime career as a ceramic artist.

"I just needed one more class to complete my major in graphic design at UCLA," he recalls. He signed up for a ceramics class and knew immediately that this was to be his medium.

"Just like that" the Zen experience of forming wet clay, hearing the hum of the potter's wheel, and Bruce was joyfully ensnared. After graduating, he taught ceramics in high school and, after earning a Master of Art degree at UCLA, was hired as Professor of Art at Santa Monica College.

He retired in 2002, opened his Ojai studio,

and still teaches one class at the college.

Studio visitors can note the Asian influences in his large classical forms. Bruce has been a worldwide traveller in the past, enjoying sabbaticals in Europe and Japan, Australia and New Zealand. "This travel enriched my teaching and my art," he believes.

Bruce's functional pieces, in subtle celadon or brilliant colors, in matte or shining glazes, have his signature Japanese Koi affixed to the top, much like a handle. The fish are formed from hollow slabs of clay and, after firing, are

“My colors are those that resonate, Latin colors. I find that burgundy resonates the most.”



Carlos Grasso, Colors that Resonate

Carlos Grasso, our cover artist, is so modest about his stunning oil paintings that he gives equal credit to his brush. “The man and the tool are simply instruments of a process,” he explains.

A spiritual person, Carlos impresses as an Old Soul, calm and self-assured. His work involves techniques and materials of the Old Masters, presented on birch plywood, gesso-

textured Masonite board, or stretched portrait-grade canvas.

“My colors are those that resonate, Latin colors. I find that burgundy resonates the most.” (You may argue with that opinion when you see the intense golden — almost sculptural — sunflower in his “Trimurti: Flower of the Sun.”)

The artist says he aims to put spiritual energy

in his paintings, often by referencing the triangle. “It is a shape found in the symbols of many of the world’s religions.”

But he believes that some of the results are “passionately intuitive.” This, Carlos explains, happens when the artist unconsciously cedes control of the direction first imagined for the painting.

Carlos speaks of this transformation with awe, gratitude, and, yes, modesty. He discusses his work and accepts compliments with a shy smile, as if the work just appeared on the canvas without his participation.

He hastens, in any discussion of his paintings, to give credit for his growth as an artist to the teachings of his longtime mentor, David A. Leffel, a renowned painter whose studio is near Taos, N. M.

Carlos has been awarded three substantial cash prizes in recent competitions, and has exhibited in galleries in Carmel, Santa Fe, San Francisco and Napa. “Years ago, I actually started by showing my work outdoors at street fairs and festivals,” he said.

Not too proud to continue this approach, Carlos hung his paintings under the trees in Libbey Park at this year’s Art in the Park and made quite a few sales. How many buyers realized they were getting work by the cover artist of the *American Artist Magazine*, a respected national publication that featured this Ojai artist in June 2006?



stained with iron oxide, a contrast texture to the pot’s glaze.

“I cut the fish form with wire to give the fins movement,” he says.

Bruce exhibited his work in Europe, Asia and Australia during his travels. In the U. S. he has exhibited at the Pasadena Art Museum, the Norton Simon Museum, the Santa Monica Museum of Functional Art, the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, Dickson Art Center at UCLA, Cal State University at Long Beach, Cal Poly Pomona, and at many private

galleries throughout Southern California.

Bruce was also the featured artist in May 2005 on the Carol Duvall Show on HGTV.

“This travel enriched my teaching and my art.”



Cindy Pitou Burton, *the lightness of seeing*

She could light her subjects with her megawatt smile.

Cindy Pitou Burton, photographer, traded the tension of Manhattan for bucolic Ojai 18 years ago. "It was truly a culture shock — and an immediate shock to my vision," she recalls.

Her work as a news and feature photographer appeared regularly in *The New York Times* and other major publications. Speed and technical know-how (always changing) were high priorities.

"But here in Ojai, my eye had to adjust to

the brilliant light, open spaces, rich colors," she says. "It was a real challenge!"

Burton soon adapted, stretching her skills and talents in new and interesting directions.

"I've really looked at these new subjects that originate in Ojai's abundant orchards and gardens," she adds.

Her attention to the "soul" of fruit, flowers, and arches of trees brings new awareness to viewers of her large-scale photographs. There is a sensuality to Cindy's portraits of gourds and lemons and heirloom tomatoes. Who knew

vegetables could look so zaftig?

Recently, she has been exploring and producing light box photos that reveal new views of her subjects, drawing you in with new information. The light box, formerly used for viewing slides with a magnifying loupe, offers back-lighting resulting in an X-ray effect. "I find this eliminates nuanced details and leaves only strong lines — when flowers or thinly sliced fruit are placed on it," she explains. "It is exciting when the familiar is seen in a new way."

This revived interest in light box photography has occupied much of her attention this past year. "I was looking for the adventure of the process, and the art followed."

Art followed in the form of pictures of lush, gigantic blooms in vivid colors ... revealing intimate details of their centers, their attachments.

The light box offers a transparency to petals and leaves. Cindy fills her photographic "canvas" with the flair of a daring painter. (Think Georgia O'Keeffe.)

Yet another major interest is travel, which led to an extended trip to Viet Nam and Cambodia late last year. "In travel you have serendipity, but more importantly you have the unexpected and the revelations of other cultures," she believes. "The light is different, the air is different, the colors leap out at you. You could just take pictures of food and markets all the time, but you have to move on, try to soak it up, and make an honest record of it in your photographs.

"And, of course, you have to adapt to the culture and not insult anyone by taking pictures without permission."

Adapting is something photographers are used to when it comes to technology, which, as noted before, is always changing. "And always challenging!" Cindy says. "When I got this huge printer I was hesitant to jump in. But once I got into it, I was in awe at what I could do with it."

The printer is an Epson Pro 3800, capable of producing 17- by 22-inch prints.

"You know, I taught darkroom techniques — burning, dodging, all that. This printer does it all for you!"

Cindy has used Nikon cameras (the workhorses of *The New York Times*) since her days in Manhattan. Her favorites now are the Nikon D90 digital camera and the Nikon FM2 manual, using film.

What's ahead for Cindy Pitou Burton? "Possibly painting. I think I'd like to pick up a brush and try my hand at art."

Of course, she already has.





Jennifer Moses, **the essence of place**

A work in progress” is a familiar saying to Jennifer Moses, who views her oil paintings — and her life — as a never-ending journey of inquiry and observation.

“It is the essence of a place that is the core of all my work.”

“I even prefer observation-based painting as a description of my work, rather than plein air,” she explains. The artist works on location “but I try to remove myself from painting a specific place.”

Her aim, she says, is to create visual poetry, rather than just a recording of a scene. “It is the essence of a place that is the core of all my work.” Back at her studio, the painting — even while already framed — may still be a work in progress, as she responds to it in new ways. “I try to find one thing to communicate without getting caught up in the details.”

Jennifer earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in art education and a teaching certificate at Virginia Commonwealth University. Soon after deciding not to teach, she moved to New York City, painting abstract landscapes and figurative work, and exhibited there.

She and her former husband came to Ojai to visit friends in 1994 “and fell in love with it,” she recalls. “We bought a 1909 Greene and Greene, the Pratt House on Foothill, and I spent two years renovating it.”

Along the way, she had a son, worked in a ceramics studio, and made and sold concrete and tile garden pottery (some very large-scale pieces). Her home in Meiners Oaks is another

expression of her talents, this time involving adobe, concrete, and tiling skills — “and blisters,” she notes.

Studying early California landscape painting inspired Jennifer to pick up a brush again. She sought a mentor and found David Gallup in Thousand Oaks, an impressionistic landscape painter. They met in 2008 at a California Art Club event. Jennifer worked with him for a year and a half, and was soon accepted as an artist member of the prestigious club.

This summer she had three paintings included in their annual Gold Medal Exhibition, a coup for a newcomer.

In Ojai, Jennifer is represented by Primavera Gallery, and in Montecito she has her work in Bottoms Gallery in the Four Seasons Biltmore Hotel. She is a member of the Oil Painters of America, and served as president of the Ojai Studio Artists for three years.

“Painting is exciting,” Jennifer believes. “There’s no arriving. There is always somewhere else to go in your evolution as an artist.”

Her next venture? “Maybe more abstract work — looking beyond the known, the recognizable.”

Stay tuned. Jennifer Moses will likely make the journey interesting.

"I'm extremely interested in shadows, too," Ray explains.
"Shadow to me is the soul of the object."



Ray Harding, the two-fisted thinker

After a 20-year hiatus from art, Ray Harding picked up a paintbrush again. Make that two paint brushes. Ray Harding paints with two brushes, one in each hand. Simultaneously. Really.

But this is not performance art. Ray paints and draws in solitude, losing himself for entire days in his concentration on a subject. "I don't paint for other people, so I get very few commissions," he explains. "It's a passion. I paint for me."

His subject might be a pair of shoes, a hand, or a haunting visage. "I like to work in series, so I can find out what intrigues me about the subject."

A series on women's shoes is highlighted by a large canvas showing rows and rows of

elegant shoes on closet shelves. Husbands will likely look askance; wives will be admiring and envious.

When Ray puts brushes (with both hands) to canvas, the acrylic paint appears to move. His paintings are textured and his palette features clear, brilliant colors. He involves Sennil oil pastels in his technique.

Ray's confident paintings have been admitted to juried competitions in Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, Ventura and Ojai, attracting awards and favorable reviews.

The same talented hands that wield paint brushes show new skills when he creates graphite pencil drawings ... also using two pencils at the same time. His subjects are often hands and their flexible positions.

These anatomical examinations of muscles and bone appear as detailed and intricate as medieval etchings.

"I'm extremely interested in shadows, too," Ray explains. "Shadow to me is the soul of the object."

Though Ray earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts at San Francisco State University, his career path immediately led him to almost two decades at IBM and a dozen years in human resources at a software firm. "And four years on a Navy destroyer," the artist recalls.

So what led him back to his easel?

"You're going to laugh. My daughter asked me to design some T-shirts for her!"

This is Ray Harding's first year on the Ojai Studio Artists Tour. And, no doubt, there will be many more.

Rex Kochel kept his eye on the ball for 18 years as a basketball coach at Ventura High School, as he shaped both boys and girls teams. His teaching schedule was filled at first with social studies classes.

But on weekends and nights his eye moved to an easel, when he studied watercolor painting at Ventura College with renowned artists Norman Kirk, Mary Michel and Richard Phelps. He also took private instruction from Kirk, a well-known Santa Paula painter who often teaches at Ojai Art Center.

"Someone at Ventura High School saw my work and urged me to get qualified to teach art," Rex recalls, "so I did and then taught art classes there for 10 years."

He retired six years ago to paint full-time and almost immediately fell into what he describes as a "dream commission." Most other artists would agree. "A realtor friend knew my work. His company was building a new headquarters, and he commissioned 54 original watercolors," he explains. Smiling, he adds: "It gets better. He said 'Paint any subjects you want. We trust you.'"

Ojai residents who visit the Ojai Athletic Club or the offices of dentist Dr. David Garber are familiar with Rex's prolific output. Often his subjects are Ojai landmarks, such as the Post Office and Boccali's Restaurant.

Rex's command of the watercolor medium results in airy, vivid depictions of his subjects. While he may layer washes, he still maintains a lightness to his art. And sometimes a dreamy quality appears, as in his painting of Don Quixote astride his horse.

Rex starts with a continuous line drawing, a technique where the artist's eyes do not move to the paper while he focuses on his subject, moving his pencil in a continuous line.

His subjects are eclectic: boats, masks, buildings. "Buildings are a favorite, especially some I did in San Miguel Allende."

En route to his "dream" commission, and while still a high school teacher, he exhibited widely: at C.C. Gallagher's in Avalon, Catalina Island; with the Santa Barbara Art Association; at the Faulkner Library and Gallery 113 in Santa Barbara; and in a solo show at the Buenaventura Art Association Gallery in Ventura.

There is luck, and there is talent, and there is preparation. Rex Kochel appears to have all three.



Rex Kochel, the continuous lines

"Buildings are a favorite, especially some I did in San Miguel Allende."