

Mike Kendall, Off the Wall



Mike Kendall, considered by friends and local artist colleagues as the “unofficial mayor” of the Benicia Arsenal artist community, will be honored with a special one-man show at **Arts Benicia** as part of its 30th anniversary celebration in 2017. *Mike Kendall – Off The Wall* will include Kendall’s paintings, mixed media works, and metal sculptures and be on view in the Arts Benicia gallery **April 8 – May 7, 2017**. Kendall, a long-time Arsenal resident, was one of two artists to be featured in Arts Benicia’s first exhibition which launched the opening of its gallery in August 1993. Although he had only lived in Benicia for two years by the time of that first exhibition, he had already become well known for his visually striking art works and his generosity toward the artist community. The selection of works in the 2017 show are representative of the range of his artistic career as well as similar in style to the pieces included in the 1993 exhibition.

Born in Tonasket, WA, Mike’s family moved to Mt. Shasta where he attended high school and took design classes. As a youth, Mike found art to be a way to explore and express his imagination about things around him. He recalls his father’s frustration with his endless questions as a child, a characteristic that has followed him throughout his life. “I always had questions about things, never the answers. My art is the same – it asks questions without answering

them.” Kendall studied at the Brooks Institute of Fine Arts in Santa Barbara from 1969-71. Intending to further his ability to paint, it was there that he unexpectedly discovered the world of metal sculpture which became an integral part of his artistic output. “The teachers show you how to create art like them, but I could never focus on what they wanted me to do. I don’t know what it was, I could never sit still in class, my mind would be staring out the window with my eyes glazed over, just thinking about stuff.” Years later, a local teacher observed, after viewing Mike’s art during open studios, “By any chance, when you were in school, were you the class clown?” Mike relishes the understanding. He had no intention of “shadowing” his teachers. He was always doing his own thing, finding his own voice.

After school Kendall was able to sell some of his sculpture, but found he could make more money selling leather goods. “There was a crafts renaissance of sorts in Santa Barbara at the time I was there. We could sell our stuff all day at the beach for no cost. My brother-in-law and I had a little business and we made all sorts of leather goods. I made leather hats lined with fur and deer antlers on the top. Someone would put one on and then the people would line up four abreast to buy them.” But as the sales expanded into wholesale opportunities, the business lost its appeal to Mike’s artistic side and he sought to venture out on his own.

He bought a 35-foot school bus to live in and envisioned an adventure with his wife, two kids, cat and dog. “I thought I was going to make a lot of money traveling around the country selling all this stuff. We only got 60 miles out of town before the bus broke down and we had to get help and borrow money to go back to Mt. Shasta. So much for that idea,” he laughs. “It was really just about getting out of town. I never had much of a plan.” After trying his hand at a number of jobs, Mike decided he was better suited to being self-employed. An increasing number of “side jobs” grew into a drywall repair and remodel business that, despite being casually organized and unlicensed, provided an income that supported his family and his endeavors in art. His work in construction was also an important foundation for the “construction” of much of his art. “I learned to weld in art school, but I really learned to weld when I worked as a well-driller and had to make a weld every 20 feet along the casing. I consider myself pretty much self-taught.”

Kendall moved his family to Benicia in 1991, when he answered an ad for a “live-work” space in the Yuba building on H Street, an old warehouse in a large complex of tin buildings from back in the 40s. “I’d never even heard of such a thing. The spaces were ratty, and at the time, artists were among the few that wanted to rent places like that.” A number of artists were already living or working in studios there: Kathy Erteman, Suzanne Long, Lisa Clague, Les Overlock, Lee Champagne, Richard vonMagnus, Sam Morse, Carol Dalton, Betsy Chandler, David Ernst. “Those were my formative years as an artist.” He enjoyed his first real dedicated studio space for two years before a flood caused him to relocate to the Arsenal area. “We had to move into my brother-in-law’s house for a while,” after the flood forced him out of his H Street studio home. “I knew right away that wasn’t the type of space for me anymore.” Kendall is grateful to Andrew Allen and his brother Kent who have served as his landlords in the Arsenal, where he acquired studio space in 1992 and has lived ever since. “The arsenal artist village” was their father Howard’s (Howard B. Allen) dream and his sons have maintained that.” The warehouse spaces are not perfect, he notes. Hot upstairs in the summer, cold downstairs in the winter, with a constant dust swirling in the air from the cars outside. But the warehouse was a way to escape boundaries. And with his construction skills, Kendall has always been able to improve the spaces he’s occupied, as well as help build out other studio spaces, endearing him to the local community.

Kendall remembers Arts Benicia in the early 1990s as a place for business people to hang out and talk about art. The dedicated volunteers that formed the non-profit in 1987 supported a broad range of arts including visual arts, theatre, poetry, and music. There wasn’t any gallery or place to show art or even much socializing between the artists and members of the organization. As more artists came in, however, the group became more pro-active in support of artists, arranging art shows at City Hall and other local venues. “That’s how we all started to come together to show our art, before there was a gallery,” he recalls. The gatherings sponsored by Arts Benicia

drew artists together to talk about art, or listen to music. David Ernst's studio was a frequently used place, where Ernst and Sam Morse, both blues musicians, played for the group.

In 1992, Kendall and Kathy Erteman went before the board of Arts Benicia, already active in fundraising for the arts, to pitch support for a space for the visual arts. Their efforts, the Board's go-ahead, and the support of many others led to the acquisition of a 2,400-square-foot warehouse space on Tyler Street the next year. Kendall spent many hours alongside other volunteers working to renovate the space and create a permanent gallery and classroom. Completed in 1993, the new spaces provided Arts Benicia a home in which to host a remarkable number of ongoing exhibitions, classes, and programs serving the local community in the years since that time.

The 1990s were a period of great productivity for Kendall. He was working in a 4000-square-foot place on Tyler Street in the same building Arts Benicia would soon share. "At that time, art was just exploding out of me," he recalled. "I was on a journey of learning and experimentation, and I had a no-fear approach. I was doing very dynamic pieces, both paintings and sculpture," including a number of bold, large-scale works. The caliber of his work increased tremendously in these years as his artistic approach matured.

Kendall names Hieronymous Bosch, a Northern Renaissance artist known for his highly detailed proto-surrealistic landscapes, and Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger as inspiration for his own work. "Bosch painted his figures without a lot of realism, there's a fantasy, cartoony-sort of approach." He was able to incorporate sinister elements and creatures, Kendall explains, in an era when art that offended an authority figure could have devastating consequences for the artist. "It's not what, but how he was saying it that interested me. In my own work, I've always thought, if you can inject a little humor, you can make a statement, but somewhat soften the overall effect. Most of my work, if figurative, is questioning, I know I don't have the answers. It's interesting to me to put a figure out there and see what are responses are." Of Giger's approach, Kendall focused on how he was able to depict dark and sinister things, aliens and creatures, and the atmosphere he created around his subjects. These inspirations can be seen in Kendall's series of carved high-relief wall pieces that suggest imagined primal creatures. Drawing on his construction background and his comfort with a variety of tools, Kendall carved molded mounds of drywall and stained or painted the pieces for a visually arresting final effect.

His sculptures range from abstract compositions to more whimsical or figurative metal pieces. Using contradictory combinations of shapes and materials, the works suggest elements from nature, household objects, machines and technology, the laboratory, or vehicles of some sort, among other ideas. His painted works explore abstractions of color and graphic shapes as well as autobiographical depictions, whimsical inquiry, and satirical reflections of social images and the human condition. "A lot of work I do is like layering. There's something for everybody, but not the same things for everybody. People see things in my art that I've not seen myself. I accept the fact that everybody brings their own experience to what I'm putting out there visually."

Kendall had become well-known locally for the hours spent building the new gallery, and locals had noticed the visually engaging pieces in the H Street studio as well. Kathy Erteman and Joe Garcia, who was president of Arts Benicia in 1993, came by his new Arsenal studio to invite him to be one of the first two exhibitors, along with Larry Morace. "It was really important that this

first exhibition make an impact, and I think they thought my artwork, as visually strong as it was, would serve that purpose. You know, art is a language, and lot of times I'm shouting." Kendall was also one of the few artists in the community to have a large enough body of work to fill the large new gallery space.

He has no shortage of work to fill the current show as well. The exhibition of Kendall's work coincides with Arts Benicia's Open Studios, taking place on May 6 and 7. He has participated in the open studios events for many years, inviting visitors into his studio to see his works and selling quite a few pieces. In recent years, however, his focus has been on sharing his space with younger artists around him who may not have their own dedicated studio space. "Part of that, for me, it's a way to stabilize the artist community down here, by making sure a lot of artists have a way to take part in it."

Kendall's assistance to other artists has become legendary. For years his studio has been the hub of an exchange of resources for artists' work, providing a drop-off, pickup, and storage site for recycled or reusable wood panels, metal, tools, and other art and craft supplies made available from local industrial waste, business giveaways, or individuals. Kendall communicated what was available or needed through BANG!, his Benicia Artists Networking Group website. He also uses social media to promote local artists, share information useful to the community, and announce art-related events. He has been the anchor for the artist-sponsored open studios program held each December in the Arsenal. Kendall's neighbors in the Arsenal have benefited greatly from his generosity, and aren't shy about saying so. Sharon Payne Bolton, whose studio is located nearby, was referred to Mike Kendall when she was looking for studio space. He helped her find the space she now occupies. "He's the unofficial mayor," she explains matter-of-factly. "He knows what's going on around here, and keeps an eye out for everyone. He knows the answers to the problems we have, so everyone comes to him for help. He sets a tone for everything around here, a can-do attitude. I've had opportunities to move into better spaces, but I won't leave, he's the Arsenal for me." Kendall says he never judges anyone's art, he simply encourages them to be in the moment and create. "Let it be as strong a journey as you want," he says, speaking from experience. "The only person that understands an artist, all the way in, pretty much, is another artist. You know, we wear our hearts on our sleeves, and we have to put up with a lot of rejection." Mike is there to support the artists. "That's what friends do," he says simply.

Kendall, who turns 70 next month, keeps making art without projecting into the future. "Art is just passion. Anything that you put your heart in, is your art. I take it one day at a time. My only desire is to die here. I'm still just pinching myself."

During its anniversary year, Arts Benicia is highlighting its 30-year history with a series of special programs and exhibitions, expanded outreach and educational programs, and publications focused on the artists, events, individuals, and organizations that have impacted and sustained Arts Benicia and the regional arts community over this time.

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