

For artist, eyes tell the story

Indian portraits prized for intensity

By Kyle Lawson
The Arizona Republic

The light of the rising sun has its work cut out for it as it fights its way into Jim Knauf's studio.

The thickly planted trees and hedges are serious about protecting the artist from intruders. But the light is sneaky, darting here and there until it finds an unprotected window. It rummages about the

studio's cluttered interior like an intruder who doesn't know where things are. Finally, it settles on a painting that lies flat on a counter.

It is a brief respite. The painting's surface is composed of layers of intricately applied paint and varnish, giving it the translucency of a crystal. The light is refracted, then reflected back into the air, a hundred beams that fade resignedly into the full light of day.

Knauf is unaware of this little war raging around him. Up since long before dawn, his attention is focused on the painting. The surface seems pristine, but he sees

something that doesn't belong. He leans over and brushes away the offending dust mote. It is an oddly affectionate gesture, which is not surprising. For weeks, he and the painting have been more intimate than lovers.

Knauf's hand continues to wander across the surface. A finger traces a swirling brush stroke. A fleeting smile touches his lips. Something in that swirl works for him in a way that perhaps only another artist could understand. Getting it right is deeply satisfying.

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Jim Knauf

Artist's path full of detours

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Although Knauf paints rodeo scenes, landscapes and even contemporary, non-Western subjects, he is known for his portraits of Native Americans. Even when these are full-figured works, visitors to his studio or to Scottsdale's Meyer Gallery, where his paintings are exhibited, seldom get past the faces.

A pity. There is another world there. A world that speaks of technique and meticulous craftsmanship. Of hours spent laying down thin coats of paint that contrast, cohabit or coalesce at the artist's whim.

This is the world of a man who began as a non-objective painter, whose early works, hanging on the walls of his living room, reveal an obsession with form and texture and a total disregard for reality. It is a style that imposes itself still, in the abstractness of the brushwork and in the penchant for random bursts of color that vanish almost as soon as they appear.

It's tempting to dismiss these as mere details, but Knauf gives considerable thought to his choices. He struggles to impart as much meaning to the background as he does to the face and costume of the portrait's subject. In terms of color and flow, the setting is complementary; it also is revelatory. Study it and the subject becomes clearer.

Still, the faces are inescapable, at least in the new work.

Like anyone, Knauf had to crawl before he could sprint. His initial attempts to capture the Native American countenance lack the clarity and intensity of the painting on the counter. Those were replicants; this is life. No wonder he smiles.

John Singer Sargent, another painter with a gift for portraiture, asked, "What is a face? It is nothing but skin attached to sinew attached to bone. You must begin the journey through the eyes. Behind them lay the hidden pathways to the soul."

These particular eyes stare boldly back at their creator. Knauf has painted the subject, Sam Tall, many times. He met the Lakota Sioux while on a trail ride along the banks of the Cheyenne River in western South Dakota. Looking back, he recalls it as "instant bonding."

An artist's love affairs aren't always sexual. True, the painter in Knauf responded to Tall's striking looks, but he was seduced by something more indefinable. Although Tall is comfortably rooted in the present, his Sioux heritage drapes around him like an invisible cloak. At unexpected moments, this mantle falls open, revealing a wisdom and wit that owes nothing to contemporary America.

Such moments fascinate Knauf. Again and again, he strives to render them in paint. With each effort, he — and the viewer — learn a little more about Tall, walk a little closer



Suzanne Starr/The Arizona Republic

Jim Knauf, seen in his Phoenix studio, has held many jobs but made his mark painting riveting portraits of Native Americans.

in his step.

In this newest attempt, as yet untitled, Tall is depicted in the tribal regalia of a century ago. He emerges from the painting clearly, but the horse he rides is ghostly, fading finally into abstract whirls of paint that suggest the endless plains, lost to time like the rider.

The mood is elegiac, the symbolism there to be found by those who look. But it is another Indian on horseback, and the galleries are cluttered with such images. It comes back to the face.

Like Sargent, Knauf sees beyond the skin and sinew. Sam Tall is not the culmination of his heritage, but the continuation. The meaning strikes one like a slap in the face. The man in the painting is alive.

It's possible that not all Native Americans possess this powerful sense of self. Knauf tends to choose models that have made space for themselves in the wider sense.

Channel 12 reporter Mary Kim Titla has been the subject of many canvases, and Knauf has painted filmmaker Jim Covarubias more than 40 times. Derek Lookingglass, considered one of the finest Native American dancers, is still another favorite. There is a part of each portrait that celebrates the ability of these people to survive and thrive in two worlds.

Aware that those worlds are different, and that he is part of only one, Knauf is careful not to intrude in areas that he feels are spiritual. That he leaves to Native American artists.

"I know there are Native Americans who have strong feelings about what I do," he says. "I respect those feelings and try to be sensitive to their concerns."

"The portraits reflect what the people I paint choose to reveal of themselves. If, at times, there seems to be a spiritual quality about the work, it is only because that quality is in the person and it will not be

ignored."

There is Cherokee blood in his veins, but the connection is distant and Knauf doesn't play on it. Yet, it's one more tie to the subject matter.

"It is a part of me that I have always wanted to know more about," he says. "What I do boils down to approaching a blank canvas and finding something I've never seen before."

"Sometimes that something is me."

Born in Colorado, Knauf was raised on the beaches of Southern California. A surfer dude? You bet, and, at age 51, he still is, with the scars to prove it. When he's not in the water, he's on the slopes, having acquired an addiction to downhill racing while a student at Northern Arizona University. (Skiing made a married man of him. He met his wife, Elaine, at a ski show where she was running the beer concession. "No way I could avoid her," he

jokes. The family now includes two sons, Trevor and Noah.)

The road to becoming a full-time artist was littered with more detours than a freeway construction zone. Knauf installed pools and landscaped gardens, sold candleholders, framed pictures and waited on customers in his dad's restaurants.

At one point, he found himself running a hotel in Sun City. It was a defining experience.

"One crisis to the next," he shudders.

The easel made its appearance soon thereafter.

"Laincy and I once counted up the number of jobs I've held," he says. "When we got to 26, we decided we wouldn't tell the kids. It would be a bad influence."

He blames it on his father.

"I don't know how many careers he had," he says. "He never told me, either. But there were a lot. Our family's motto always has been: 'Don't sit still and let the dust



Jim Knauf

"Horizon," by Knauf. "The portraits reflect what the people I paint choose to reveal of themselves," he says. Knauf also lavishes attention on backgrounds.

gather."

Knauf began his studies at NAU as a philosophy major but soon switched to art, finishing up his degree at the University of California at Irvine.

"I don't know that I ever planned it as a career," he admits. "We were very business-oriented as a family, but my mother did paint when I was a kid and she would store the paintings in my bedroom when she wasn't working on them."

"It interested me the way they progressed. Though most of the talk around our dining room table was about Dad's various enterprises, there always was room for a lively discussion of how she was doing."

"I guess I felt that gave me permission to take art seriously."

Making the decision to become a full-time artist was easier than figuring out what to paint. He didn't wake up one morning and cry, "Cowboys! Bronco riders! Indians!" "I sort of wormed into it, not out of any affinity for the iconography of the West but because I wanted to paint the West as I saw it," he says.

"Oh, hell, maybe that's not true. Maybe I just wanted to paint, period. And I was in the West."

There never was any doubt that

faces would come to dominate the work. His living room and the adjacent dining room are crammed with framed photographs. Each morning, they greet him: family members, friends, the memories of good times. In reality, the images are nothing more than a chemical reaction on paper but, in another context, they represent his life. They chart where he has been and, with a little imagination and interpretation, provide a glimpse of where he's headed.

Not a bad inspiration for an artist. "The work starts with edges, compositions, colors," he says, reflectively. "The reins are in my hands. But there's always a point where instead of guiding the art, I begin to ride where it takes me. The face takes shape. It looks back at me and says, 'This is who I am.'"

"Look, I don't know how it happens. In terms of technique, yeah, sure, I could tell you what I do. But how that combination of paint and brush strokes turns into a human being? That's the mystery. That's the joy."

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