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Artist in Residence

By Anne Lies

“Lately I’ve been doing a lot with Batman.” Leonard James Petersen points out the Caped Crusader as he makes his way around a studio jammed with paintings and 3-dimensional assemblage art pieces. “He was neither an accident nor an alien. He was just an ordinary man.” In other words, any ordinary person can make an extraordinary life, and as I stand in his space, I’m surrounded by the evidence to prove it.

Have even a brief conversation with this Lyndale Neighborhood resident and you’ll know he’s a colorful guy, both literally and figuratively. Hang out with him for an afternoon and you’re in for a cool trip.

Petersen served in the U.S. Air Force during World War II, and when he returned to Chicago, he thought he had his career squared away as a real estate broker. “I was good at it, and very successful.” By the age of 31, he says, “I had all those things you’re supposed to want.” What he was missing was less tangible but far more important. He took some time, traveled in Europe, and when he returned he was in a position to take the kind of sharp turn that most people only dream about. He sold off his holdings and went to art school.

“I was raised in the fiery days of Abstract Expressionism,” he says. While he thrived in the non-representational form, he felt inadequate about his training in figure. So, after earning his B.A. from the University of Illinois, Champagne Urbana, he went on to graduate study at the University of Oregon, Eugene.

Petersen emerged from graduate school in 1966 at the age of 40. “The world was mine,” he smiles. Out of several job offers, he settled on a faculty position with the University of Wisconsin, Superior, as a professor (now emeritus) of painting and drawing. It offered the “perfect hideout” from his former life. Planning to try it out for a year, he ultimately stayed for 27. “It was like 27 minutes. The great thing about academia, [is that] you can explore everything.” He laughs, “It certainly wasn’t the money!”

In the course of his studies, Petersen made a curious discovery. He couldn’t see perspective coming to a point. “I didn’t know I had the problem until I started advanced drawing.” Even today he can’t seem to find a comfortable term for it. He doesn’t like labels such as “disability” or “deficiency.” “I think of it as [being] extremely ‘right-lobed,’” he says.

Most people would say that’s pretty much par for the course with artists.

“Studying figure clicked me onto form and proportion,” he says. He compensated for his “right lobe” with method and research, even going so far as to study cadavers to solidify his understanding of human figure and form. “It’s like getting back [some] part of yourself and examining it. Not rejecting it, but keeping it as part of the repertoire.”

It is, of course, a process. And finishing a painting does not necessarily mean that the process is complete. His images, he says, are all efforts at self-realization, “totally from my unconscious. Nothing pre-structured or planned.” So he continues to study his work long after the paint has dried. “Twenty years later I find out what [it] was all about.”

As a blend of abstract expressionist and figurative approaches, his art is more about feeling than form, and has a colorful and narrative personality. Reminiscent of story cloths, his paintings scan more like visual narrative than mere pictures. “This one is my wife,” he says, referring to large painting that depicts numerous images and a flowing story. “To me, this is a portrait.” Another piece is titled, “An Ant and an Amoeba are Refused Rental of a Limo by Three Dealers, Themselves Aliens.”

“Shows you how it goes,” he shrugs.

Though Petersen’s work can be found in various private and public collections, making sales isn’t a priority. “[As an artist] you either manufacture and sell it, or you just exude something from the top of your head. It would be out of keeping with what I’ve done to put emphasis on selling my work.” He makes art for himself and adds, “I love criticism. I don’t care about the praise.”

Make no mistake, Petersen knows that it’s not that easy for every artist, and he fully acknowledges that he’s had good fortune in life. “In a way, the first 60 years were just like watching a movie,” he says. “It didn’t get hard until the last 10.” He continues to produce new work even as he is learning from, and making changes to, much older pieces and admits that he really has no concept of time. “Sometimes it’s inconvenient, but it’s all I know.”