

Seeing Life With Childlike Naiveté

Mike Newman taps into his experiences teaching youngsters to create whimsical paintings on glass

By Lori Russell

Some call it doodling. Others, the work of a budding artist.

What is it about the top of a school desk that entices kids to pull out a pencil and draw?

In his years as a teacher in Wasco County, Mike Newman has seen his students create everything from simple line drawings to detailed sketches and collages.

He understands the impulse for self-expression. Growing up in Los Angeles, he created plenty of desk art himself.

“There’s something about that smooth slick surface that just feels right,” he says.

While Mike is still drawn to smooth surfaces—he now paints on glass—his creative efforts these days can be found in art galleries and private collections.

Some artists capture the grandeur of nature by painting majestic landscapes or



Right, natural light streams into his studio as Mike Newman paints on a recycled window.

Below, brushes, paints and paintings in Mike’s studio.



exploring inner human conflicts through abstract form.

Mike’s art is informed by his observations and reflections while teaching kindergarten and first-grade students for more than a decade. There, he saw life’s joys and tragedies played out on the playground, from fledgling friendships and jumping rope to skinned knees and the effects of poverty or abuse.

He describes his paintings as “intentionally naïve,” inspired both by the daily lives of children and by images from Renaissance paintings, legends, myths and religious stories.

St. Francis and his animals

and a young girl’s adventures with nature are reoccurring subjects in his work. Butterflies and birds often appear as angelic creatures—representatives of the Divine.

“In Japanese art, there is a bird and flower tradition where some of the large themes of art—life, beauty, death—are found in the small subjects of insects and flowers,” Mike explains. “I approach painting playfully, but with serious intent. I am seeking the sublime in the lives of kids and butterflies.”

As a painter, Mike enjoys experimenting with color.

“Since I was a young child, I have responded to color



“It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.”

—Pablo Picasso

in a physical and visceral way,” he says. “In my work, I use pure, saturated pigments, often straight from the tube. I love to paint this way. I’m allowing myself to let go of a lot of training.”

Mike begins a piece by applying acrylic paint—vibrant blues, purples, oranges and yellows—to the glass with his fingers or a brush.

After the paint dries, he uses a razor blade to scratch off some of the pigment, and then adds another layer. By repeating the process several times, he creates texture and depth.

Mixing opaque and translucent pigments creates an effect similar to stained glass.

Mike often begins a series of paintings by exploring the challenges of form and composition on small 8-by-10-inch pieces of glass before creating larger works on recycled wood-framed windows.

Thanks to donations from friends, he now has a basement full of old windows.

“Because I paint on the backside of the glass, I must create the images reversed

from how they will ultimately appear to the viewer, much like a reflection in a mirror,” Mike explains.

After several years using this technique, painting backwards has become his natural style. That posed an interesting challenge this year while working on a series of murals with students at Discovery High, the alternative school where he now teaches.

“I was so used to painting in reverse on glass,” says Mike. “I had to really slow down and concentrate (to not reverse the images) when painting on the wall.”

While some might consider Mike’s paintings whimsical, he draws a distinction between “approaching painting as a child would” and “painting like a child.” The former refers to creative expression, the later to technique.

There is nothing simple or childish about Mike. During a discussion of light, shadow and texture in his paintings, he rushes to find a tome on Rembrandt from his extensive library of art books to illustrate his point.

Asked about the oversized heads of the subjects in his paintings, he cites examples from African art.

The large eyes? He references a quote from Pablo Picasso.

By “approaching painting as

a child,” Mike reaches beyond the technical aspects of his craft to create an experience shared by both the artist and those who view his work.

“Primitive art and art by kids has a certain quality that is driven by faith or the need to connect,” he says. “I invite those who view my work to make their own meaning of it, just as I try to make mine.

“It is like preparing a meal. When I make dinner, it is not just for me or just for you to enjoy. It is for both of us.” ■

Mike’s paintings can be found at Westwind Gallery in The Dalles or on his Web site, www.mikespaintings.net.

Art Show Set

Mike Newman’s work will be displayed from September 4-27 at the Columbia Center for the Arts, 215 Cascade Ave., Hood River. For details, call (541) 387-8877 or see www.columbiaarts.org.



Two of Mike’s paintings: “Don Quixote,” top, and “Jumping Rope Girl,” left.