

# A Painter's Paradise

By Cathy Gordon Photos by Susan Friday Photography



## *Bliss comes with canvas and a paintbrush*

**M**ary Carol Kenney needn't go far to find her bliss. "Put that paint brush in my hand and I'm good to go," says the figurative artist whose enticing alternative universe is just a few steps inside her front door.

"Yeah, my favorite place to be is my art studio. Painting is my first love and my delicious torment. It can be frustrating. But I guess it's like meditation or close to it. When I paint, I find my ultimate relaxation."

Lucky for fans, Kenney paints often.

The award-winning artist from Santa Barbara, Calif. is relatively new to the Houston arts scene, making her home in The Woodlands. But she is fast becoming im-

mersed in the area's art world as a member of Houston's Visual Arts Alliance.

Her home is testament to her creativity. An eclectic mix of quilts, pillows and slipcovers born from her hands are on display, along with a collection of deliciously sinuous sculptures she's made.

And then there are her paintings – large, vibrant, soulful pieces in riveting detail that dare one to touch. Their expressive eyes stare back from the walls, keeping Kenney company as she puts oil to canvas, adding to this figurative family.

"I love painting faces. I get lost in them. Painting is so fulfilling, but sometimes I go to bed thinking something is great and wake

Mary Carol Kenney relaxes at home, surrounded by her art. Her first large figurative oil piece, "Josephina" (to the left) was painted on a door. The talented seamstress also makes her own pillows and slipcovers.



"Yellow, Blue and Green"



"Nude Study"



"MariAnn Dreaming"

up in the morning and think it's awful," says Kenney. "So you just sand it off and keep trying. And you keep trying because you are just absolutely in love with painting."

That "keep trying" motto seems to have worked for Kenney who has always felt the inner tug of an artist. "I think creativity waits for you," she says.

#### **A Talent Put on Hold**

But life, at least for a while, seemed to have other plans. After high school, she attended the Herron School of Art in Indianapolis, taking technical courses such as applied drawing. Due to "complicated times," she dropped out before completing a full curriculum. Painting classes would have to wait.

Life went on. She married and had three children, two daughters and a son. This doting mother sought a way to earn money while staying home. An expert seamstress, she found it sewing slipcovers for clients. Divorce came. She kept sewing to make ends meet.

"I sewed all night. That's how I raised them," she says. And to satisfy her creative bent, she drew her children while they slept peacefully. "Perfect subjects."

But she still had not painted.

Fast-forward some years. The children were grown and a client-friend offered Kenney her Santa Barbara





"Study of Tina"



"Six Feet Off The Ground"

home as a studio. "It was going to be empty three months. Did I want to stay there? Well, yes! I decided, this was my turn. I'm going to be an artist now."

Months in Santa Barbara turned into years. She took art classes through the town's adult education system and became a member of the Santa Barbara Art League. She thrived on sculpture. "Love how tactile it is," she says.

To make a living, she linked up with decorators, sewing slipcovers for celebrity clients Ringo Starr, Rob Lowe, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Christopher Lloyd and Anthony Hopkins, to name a few. "It was fun doing that and I was taking advantage of the art classes."

A local gallery, "kind of a training wheels gallery for artists," was a great venue for league members to show their works. But it was often booked two to three years in advance.

Then came a telephone call.

"They said they had an opening, someone had backed out last minute. I was like, 'Great! For sculpting?' She said, 'No, for a painter.'"

Kenney, then 50 years old and never having painted, didn't hesitate. "I told her, 'I'm a painter!' But I didn't have one painting to my name. I had drawn some and did sculptures, but I'd never painted. I had a month to get ready for this show."

This rather large technicality didn't deter Kenney. She rounded up supplies

and went to work.

Her inspiration came from Jell-O molds. Her aunt's Jell-O molds, to be exact. Kenney painted a series of exotic molds, stuffed with all manner of crazy items. "My aunt used to put so much stuff in her Jell-O you couldn't eat it," quips Kenney. "That was my motivation."

The Jell-O mold paintings were a success. The fire was lit.

The first large figurative piece she ever painted, the exotic "Josephina," took seven months to complete. The 83-by-32-inch oil, painted on a door, adorns the wall of her living room. "Loved painting her," Kenney says. "She was part of my journey."

### Recognition Begins

That journey drew recognition and awards. A 44-by-20-inch roller derby scene titled "Mission City Brawlin' Betties" won first prize in The National Art Museum of Sport international contest. She also nabbed first prize in The Natural History Museum Art Walk, a prestigious show in Santa Barbara. The show is typically 90 percent landscape art, but new-to-the-art-world Kenney's figurative piece had people talking.

The circuitous, never-a-dull-moment path to her painting career found its way to The Woodlands when her friend decided to sell the Santa Barbara house.



"Mission City Brawlin' Betties"



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The artist works on a new series titled "Legacy." The first in the series is a painting of China's revolutionary leader, Mao Zedong, awash in flowers.



"Tina With Interior"



"Alex"



"Les Lapins"





"Auana"



"Little Moon Resting"

"Leaving that place was hard, but I knew I'd find another place to call home," says the artist who hit the road, first visiting one of her daughters here. "Over dinner she told me she was pregnant with my first grandbaby. So, of course I wanted to stay here! And it turns out it's a very nice place to be for an artist. Houston is just unbelievable! So edgy and creative. I love The Woodlands and the Houston art community."

She spends long hours in her studio these days creating a series titled "Legacy" about well-known people who left behind rich legacies in their death. "I'm going to try to not edit myself and just see what comes out," she explains, pointing to the first in the series, a painting of China's revolutionary leader, Mao Zedong, awash in flowers.

"I read this quote after I started working on it where he said, 'Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.' I think this is a little bit about politicians and their promises and it's a little bit about what's going on in China now and how it's blooming. The next in the series is going to be Mother Teresa covered in butterflies. It'll be light for all the love she sent out into the world. I can't wait to get it started.

"And then there's another... and another... I think there are four people lined up back there in my brain. It'll be fun."

For more information about Mary Carol Kenney, visit [marycarolkenney.com](http://marycarolkenney.com) or call 805-705-0750. ●