

ARTSPAN presents: SF Open Studios

the guide 2008



pick up on art.

LIVING AN ARTIST'S LIFE: REACHING THE TURNING POINT

PHOTOS AND ARTICLE BY PRISCILLA OTANI

Each of the four artists in this interview made a turning point decision to make art his or her top priority. By uncluttering their lives and by finding just enough work to support themselves, they have been able to work full-time in their studios.

How can one live as a full-time artist? It's a question many of us have, as we graduate from art school and seek opportunities that enable us to continue to create art. Many of us end up working full-time jobs and after a few years, it's daunting to venture beyond the safety net of steady income and benefits. It is true that most artists will not become spectacularly wealthy or famous. Luckily, many do find a way, through drive and determination, to have deeply fulfilling lives. I talked with four such artists.

Paul Morin worked a full-time job as a marketing manager after graduating from art school. He thought he would paint in the evenings and weekends but the

job was all-consuming and the commute brutal. The turning point came in 2003 when he was laid off. Instead of looking for another job, Morin made the decision to paint full-time. By having a supportive partner and living on his art sales and savings, he paints five days a week in his 1890 Bryant Street studio.

A portrait painter in the Beaux Arts style, Paul Morin has been hooked on oil painting since he was 16 years old. He fell in love with the works of Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Rubens. His art school didn't teach him Old Masters' techniques so he honed his skills by studying art history books and spending a lot of time in museums. He

found unfinished paintings by Rubens particularly helpful because the works revealed the layering techniques he used.

The human face and body fascinate Morin. He paints from reference photographs and photographs of individuals who commission portraits. Morin incorporates Old Masters' techniques, including the use of optical grays to build luminescence in the flesh tones. He puts a contemporary spin by stripping the background and filling the frame with his subject.

A prolific painter, Morin has five to 15 paintings going at the same time. He is currently working on a series of portraits

1/ Artist Dolores Gray standing in front of her artwork, *Ida B. Wells: For These Twelve* 2/ Artist Rebecca Fox in her studio 3/ Artist Paul Morin

18 ArtSpan

with backgrounds of gold leaf. Morin has shown his work at local venues, including the Reaves Gallery in San Francisco, and is seeking opportunities to have his works shown in a gallery that specializes in Old Masters or Beaux Arts-style works.

Rebecca Fox got hooked on welding after taking a class at San Francisco City College. She continued to take the same class over and over so that she could weld and have space to store her growing pile of metal. Soon she became a teaching assistant and a welder's assistant at a metal shop to further satisfy her craving for fire and metal. After several years at City College, Fox moved to Hunters Point Shipyard and last year moved to Islais Creek Studios. She now works part time as a chandelier cleaner, a self-owned business that allows her ample time in her studio.

Many of Fox's sculptures create

interesting negative and positive spaces through the use of open circular shapes bisecting other circles or lines. Her recent pieces incorporate surface textures and scratches that, especially under lighting, add an interesting dimension.

Fox does not sketch out her designs. She begins intuitively by pulling out scrap metal from her large collection, then arranging them on the floor or holding them up together. Once she is satisfied with her composition, she welds her sculpture, taking pride in hiding the welds so the attachments are not obvious to the viewer. She enjoys creating pieces that give the illusion of metal floating in air. Once the pieces are put together, Fox decides how they will be finished – whether surfaces will be left plain, marked with patterns or painted.

Fox has shown her works at SFMOMA Artists' Gallery. She has more than 100

collectors, many of whom drop by every open studios. She is seeking a gallery that can display her large pieces so that they can be seen by a broader public.

Dolores Gray was a medical malpractice investigator when she decided to take a photography class in Rome one summer to get away from the demands of her job. That study-abroad program led Gray back to school at age 36 to earn both an undergraduate and graduate degree in art. By the time she was out of school, she was in her 40s, and she realized that none of her art classes prepared her for a career in art.

Fortunately, a volunteer teaching stint with the Friends of Photography led to jobs teaching art to children all over the Bay Area. Because Gray is an independent contractor, she can balance her work and art – she teaches Monday through Wednesday and is in her studio

at Hunters Point Thursday through Sunday. This lifestyle resonates with Gray, despite the challenges of arts education cutbacks in California. Teaching children, many in disadvantaged neighborhoods, is an opportunity to give back and to instill creativity. Gray sees teaching and art-making as a continuous circle, one nourishing the other.

Gray's recent focus has been assemblage and mixed media painting. Her assemblage incorporates photographs, paint, and objects in a narrative form. For one piece, Gray got her original inspiration from a television show on vampirism. She arranged eggshells, antique photographs, feathers, and a silver spoon in a box and painted a red line around the interior. Soon after, she read about Strom Thurmond's African-American daughter, the child of a maid he had raped when he was young. The assemblage took on new meaning, about

4/ Artist Jenn Porreca surrounded by her Manga and Amish folk-art influenced artwork

LIVING AN ARTIST'S LIFE: REACHING THE TURNING POINT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

hidden bloodlines in families, about a child who could have had a "silver spoon" but didn't because her father refused to acknowledge her. She titled her piece, *Secret Lines*.

Gray shies away from titles that over explain her pieces, preferring to have a dialog with the viewer who visits her studio. She enjoys hearing the viewer's perspectives on a piece, which can be both similar and different from her own. "Art that is too personal is uninviting," she says.

Jenn Porreca worked as a full-time grant writer at a nonprofit that serviced the disabled. She painted at the end of the day and late into the night, but was dissatisfied with the quality of her brushstrokes and the time it took to finish her pieces. She consoled herself with the thought that she would become a painter in another lifetime. Then one day she made the decision to quit her full-time job. She now works part time, three days a week and paints at home the rest of the time. She considers Monday and Wednesday her studio days, although she also paints every evening, sometimes until 1am.

Using fine brushes, Porreca likes to paint on wood with acrylics. She is influenced by European silhouette and folklore artists of the early 1900s as well as Manga and Amish folk art. There is a strong narrative quality to Porreca's work, which often includes a recurring female character that inhabits a magical cityscape. She considers journaling an integral part of her creative process. Each of her paintings becomes a story based on personal experience, such as a conversation she had with her mother when she was five years old. Talking about a recent trip to the Philippines, Porreca says that her journal writings and photographs will be incorporated in her paintings, along with a color palette she associates with the Philippines.

Porreca has had solo shows at Distinction Gallery in San Diego and Ad Hoc Art Gallery in New York, and she is booked for shows through 2009. Her paintings have attracted many collectors and a story appeared recently in *Juxtapoz Magazine*. After years of modest success, Porreca considers herself exceedingly lucky to be on an upward trajectory. She enjoys having deadlines to produce work. She is very disciplined with her painting, though she finds it challenging to juggle the business aspect of building relationships with clients, agents, and gallery owners, managing her finances and maintaining her part-time job. Still, she wouldn't trade her current circumstances for anything.

Each of the four artists in this interview made a turning point decision to make art their top priority. By uncluttering their lives, by finding just enough work to support themselves, they have been able to work full time in their studios. To persevere in what they do, they have to be disciplined and ambitious, inward thinking and self-promoting, miserly in their expenses, and extravagant in their ideas. Being a full-time artist has worked for Paul Morin, Jenn Porreca, Dolores Gray, and Rebecca Fox. They have no regrets.