

Stephen O'Donnell is self-obsessed, but in a good way. He paints delicate portraits of himself having all kinds of fun—more fun, in fact, than he seems to have time for in real life.

His new show at the Quartersaw Gallery, where he's been showing for the past five years, runs through April 29. His paintings, which he does in acrylic with ultrafine brushes on rather small boards and canvases, can take a month to complete.

"It's hard on my nervous system—the concentration—and I don't have very steady hands," O'Donnell explains.

He also works at a bookstore four days a week.

"On my days off I work all day painting, so I never really have a day off," he adds.

But in his paintings he has some fine adventures. In one especially glamorous piece, *We Were Dancing (I Was Never Lovelier)*, O'Donnell paints himself as both Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers against a starry background, gliding across a polished floor.

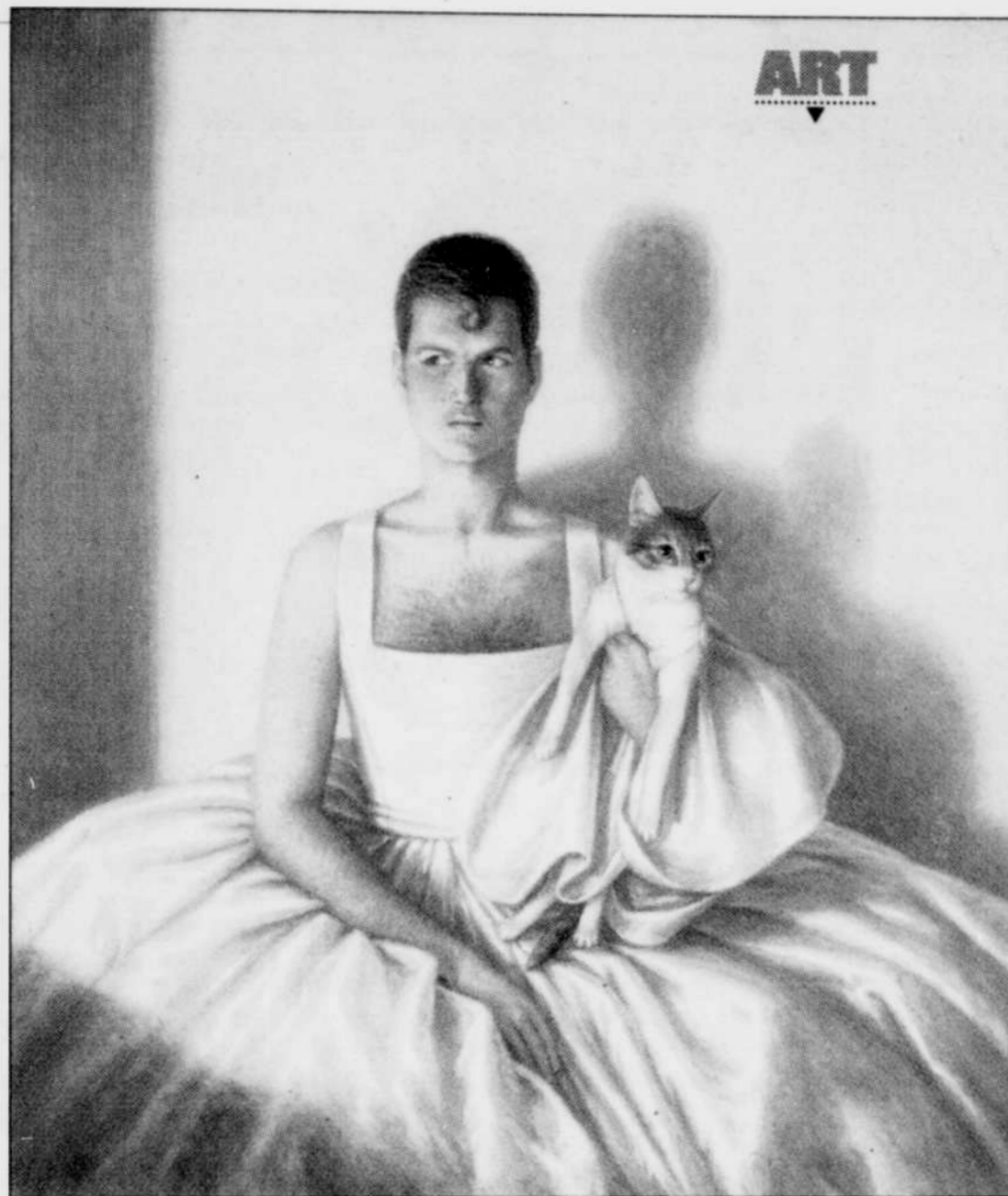
Though many of his paintings have a surreal quality about them, O'Donnell says he is "more influenced by film, music and history." He particularly loves films from the 1930s, the haute glamour era of Hollywood. To help create that mind-set, while he works he often listens to French songs from the '20s and '30s.

He's also a Russian history buff, and his current show contains four works with that inspiration. In *The Grand Duchess Vladimir and I Admire Her New Cartier Tiara*, the artist gets to wear the crown himself.

In his artist's statement, O'Donnell explains why he paints himself: "I consciously use the self-portrait as a device to try to direct attention toward the content of the work, rather than to the identity of the subject."

Despite his obvious skill and accomplishments, O'Donnell is a classic tortured artist.

"I've been struggling my whole

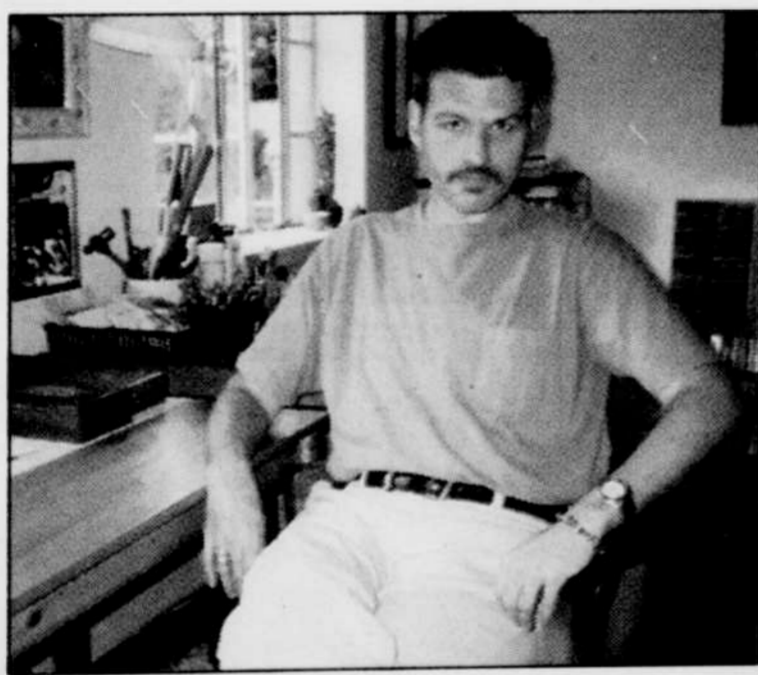


Deux Chats en Taffetas Blanc

life not to paint," he explains, the angst very evident in his voice. "When I was a child I was always told, 'Oh, you're so talented,' but it was a mixed message."

O'Donnell says he feels obligated to express his talent but is torn about becoming a commercial commodity.

"I figure I wasn't given this ability for nothing.... I have something to say—not a conscious process—but gender identity is certainly



Will the real Stephen O'Donnell please step forward?

a theme," he says, adding that he first tried doing drag in the mid-'80s as a once-a-year fun thing.

In fact, most of the images in this show are of O'Donnell in drag. In *Deux Chats en Taffetas Blanc*, he poses with his very shy cat, Gatito, and in *Bird Call* he has adapted a costume he wore to the Dada Ball a few years ago.

*Bird Call* is notable for another reason: the dramatic use of red—or any strong color, for that matter. O'Donnell is a man of few colors. The paintings in his current show are predominantly black, white and ochre. He does own tubes of other colors, "but they don't get used much," he says. His tastefully decorated apartment and his wardrobe also reflect his dedication to a neutral palette.

His muted color sense does seem to fit his historical pieces quite well. In *La Tempête à Versailles*, he floats dreamlike above the famous French gardens in a sumptuous ball gown from the era of Marie Antoinette. In *White Berdache*, he's decked out in a wasp-waisted gown with impossibly pointed shoes, his hair swirled into an extreme beehive while manly chest hair peeks out from the bodice of the dress. (The

## New master

Portland artist paints himself into history and other fun places

BY ORIANA GREEN



Bird Call

word *berdache* designates a North American Indian male transvestite or homosexual who was accepted in assuming the dress, role and status of a woman.)

There is a lightness to these portraits, and O'Donnell has a decidedly droll outlook on himself. "I'm trying to do humorous things—getting the point across, but making it funny makes it easier to swallow," he says.

Still, there are serious undertones to these pieces. "Underneath, it's a reaction to the loudly conservative voices in this state, country, world that have little respect for difference and personal uniqueness," O'Donnell explains.

The artist moved to Portland in 1993 after 13 years in California. He began revisiting his art, at first doing pieces just for himself. Some early work that he showed at Quartersaw dealt with a lot of childhood issues, another period reflected the influence of Mexican folk art. Now he's immersed in his fantasy self-portraits.

So where do his ideas come from?

"A picture just appears in my mind...all the stuff that's gone on in my life coalesces into something," he explains. "Part of me wants to pull it back so it's not exactly real—I'm not a realist, even though I have a precise style."

O'Donnell, who leads a rather solitary life, admits he barely has time for a social life, but he's "working toward a more balanced me," he adds.

His paintings, which hover in the \$1,000 to \$1,500 range, sell very well. But O'Donnell is quick to point out that it's not about money at this stage: "It wouldn't be worth it as an hourly wage."

He also does commissioned portraits, though it'll take patience to get one.

"I have a waiting list, because I haven't had any new work for sale since last August," he says, feeling the pressure to complete several more paintings before his opening.

Here's hoping O'Donnell can find time to live out some of his painted fantasies, or at least take some time off!

■ STEPHEN O'DONNELL's work is on display through April 29 at the Quartersaw Gallery, 528 N.W. 12th Ave. Call (503) 223-2264 for gallery hours.

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