

ART

# Artists at work

Peek behind closed doors during Portland Open Studios

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

Every October, dozens of artists set out the welcome mat for Portland Open Studios, a self-directed tour that allows visitors behind the scenes with painters, sculptors, ceramic artists, metal smiths, glass blowers, photographers, fiber artists and printmakers.

Art buffs can check out an artist's workspace, ask questions, discover work in progress and even pick up an addition to their collections. In a whirlwind advance tour, *Just Out* visited with four gay and lesbian artists participating in this year's event and found both diversity and camaraderie.

Tucked away in St. Johns is the studio of R. Keaney Rathbun, scientist by day and artist for life. He works among several media, alternating between well-thought-out, bold and colorful silk-screen printmaking and the go-with-the-flow, sculptural collages of found objects.

In his most recent series of prints, *This Parade I Am*, individual figures reflect aspects of his personality and then join to form a central composite that alone required 65 screens to produce.

Unlike intricate printmaking, however, Rathbun's sculptures are freeform and playful. He often has more than one in progress, joining shapely wood and found objects by metal rods and epoxy glue before painting.

Most work is autobiographical, but Rathbun says: "Hopefully it's larger than a specific, even though it is very specific to me. I think the definition of art is that it becomes a universal object."

What might not be immediately noticeable, though, is its evolution since Rathbun's coming out eight years ago. His early work was much more technical and exacting with hard-edge lines. "Now there's so much more life and vitality," he remarks. "It's all about the journey."

For ceramics artist and printmaker Annie Meyer, the journey has been equally dramatic. She works in a sunny storefront studio on Southeast Clinton Street and just returned from a sojourn to paint in the French countryside. But that picture contrasts with her roots as a Midwest kid turned homeless Los Angeles teen who put herself through nursing school in order to get a credit card to buy art supplies.

Now only on-call as a nurse, Meyer has time to explore her creativity. She works primarily with glazes on tiles, sometimes painting and firing six times to create subtle landscapes. But she also extends the theme to monotypes, paintings and drawings, often using live models for figurative studies.

Being a lesbian, she says, has given her much liberty in her art. "We don't have to follow all the rules.... Having the guts to say I don't have to have a traditional relationship, I don't have to have a traditional life—the more I do that, the better it gets," says Meyer. For example, her original work centered on hand-painted but functional tiles. Now her art is more abstract, serendipitous, odd-sized and getting bigger.

Meyer has participated in Open Studios several times and appreciates the opportunity to show others her profession. "People come in and look at what you're doing and ask ques-



Larry Cwik, Richard Moody, Keaney Rathbun and Annie Meyer open up during Portland Open Studios

tions," she says. "It's not scary. It's a nonthreatening way for people to come in and see what an artist is doing. A lot of parents even bring their kids."

Which suits Richard Moody, a retired elementary school teacher who still leads classes in ceramics for both kids and adults. This will be his first year welcoming Open Studios visitors into his peaceful workspace near the Garden Home neighborhood of Southwest Portland.

"I really like the idea of people being able to come into an artist's studio rather than always seeing art as kind of isolated in galleries and away from the artist," he notes.

As a potter, Moody often casts shapes from found objects that have an interesting texture, such as rocks, metal springs and seed pods, before building upon them with additional

clay. Then through paint and glaze, he works for a surface that plays off natural cracks and crevices.

"I really look at this as a whole process of learning. You start making tacky little soap dishes and then you go from there," he muses.

More recently, Moody has been stacking smooth and shiny ceramics with rusting objects to create modern-day outdoor totems. In one, a blue sphere shoulders what looks like a gas

burner. Several such sentries hold their posts in his garden, guiding his future studies in contrasting texture.

Totems also appear in the work of Larry Cwik, a photographer, visual artist and filmmaker who works from a downtown Portland high-rise apartment. His totems, however, are a series of three stacked, black-and-white images that relate to a central theme. One, for example, depicts the sun, a helmeted head and a round piece of a boat—elements that he says "all relate to a higher level."

His other major photo series is titled *The Visitor*, a 20-year collection of pictures taken in a number of Mexican cities.

"When you go to a place that's very different, your mind can be altered to some degree so that you see things very newly," notes Cwik, who embraces surrealism in Mexico. "The colors and the way things are arranged there are just different. Combinations are unusual. For instance, you can see sometimes the most bizarre things when you're just walking by. One time, I saw a mannequin—a woman—with a neck brace in the window. Just the most glamorous mannequin you can imagine—with a neck brace."

The meaning of which he leaves to the viewer.

"If an artist tries to say what to think, that defeats the purpose of creating art," he states. "For me, it's expression and communication."

PORTLAND OPEN STUDIOS runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Oct. 11 and 12 on the east side and Oct. 18 and 19 on the west side. Tickets are \$12 for two adults (kids free) and include a map and guide, available from area galleries, Art Media stores and [www.portlandopenstudios.com](http://www.portlandopenstudios.com).



Stop by Keaney Rathbun's place to find appealing freeform sculptures, including "Adam and Steve"



Having just returned from France, Annie Meyer is reflecting fresh, new, countryside landscapes



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