

LIFE AND DEATH BY PABST

Whiteaker stalwart Lefty Kelleher takes home top prize for Eugene PBR art contest



PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

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By some fateful collision of time, situation and personality, certain individuals come to represent the places where they live, in such a way that the association becomes nearly mythological: Lou Reed symbolizes the junky glam of the East Village, Harvey Milk is forever Mayor of the Castro District, Saul Bellow haunts Chicago’s Humboldt Park.

And then there’s Lefty Kelleher, reigning pope of Eugene’s Whiteaker neighborhood. With his broad pirate bandana, endearing fuck-you attitude and mean left hook (literally), Kelleher perfectly embodies the spirit of the Whit — a spirit that is at once inclusive and free, that cheers “let’s do it!” in the same breath it hollers “don’t tread on me, mofo!”

Earlier this month, Kelleher won the second annual Eugene Pabst Blue Ribbon art contest with his “Death by Pabst” sculpture, further cementing his local legend and ensuring him a year’s supply of PBR (52 cases), which he jokes should last him about three months.

Incredibly, the skull, which is plastered with PBR labels and has an actual PBR tap mounted on top, was Kelleher’s first-ever attempt at making art. “I just decided to do something different,” he says. “I’m a former biker, former drummer, got my arm ripped off by a drunk driver. I thought I’d do something different. Last year I went to the art contest and I said, ‘I can do better than that.’”

Keller was born in Brooklyn and moved to the Whit nearly two decades back after a stint in Flagstaff, Ariz. “I’ve been in Whiteaker for 18 years,” he says. “I landed in this town and I never left. I love it.”

He recently retired from a gig in property maintenance, though he still receives chunks of settlement money from the accident that years ago cost him his left arm. In fact, he says, he and some friends recently blew his most recent allotment in a bit of a spree. “Killed ten grand in Vegas,” Kelleher laughs. “Smashed out a TV. They put me in another room, because there’s prime rib on the ceiling. They’re like, ‘How’d you get that window open?’”

Kelleher says he’s pleased with the results of his first stab at art, which took him about a week to complete. “I gotta admit, man, I talked to the owners of Sam Bond’s and they donated like 30 bottles to me. I soaked off the labels,

trimmed them,” he says, explaining that he then pasted the labels onto a ceramic skull. “It’s not real, but it looks like it could have been.” The owners of the recently closed Diablo’s Downtown Lounge, Kelleher adds, donated the beer tap that protrudes from the top of the skull.

“Death by Pabst” will now go up against art by a contest winner from the Portland region, and if Kelleher wins, he’s got himself a lifetime supply of PBR, or 52 cases a year until he dies. “I know!” he says. “They’re trying to kill me, man!”

Kelleher says the organizers of the competition contacted him about his art after he took the blue ribbon. “They asked me after I won, ‘You want to donate this to us?’ I said, no, this is going on eBay, bitch. I’ve been offered \$400 so far.”

The contest was held May 18 at the Horsehead Bar downtown, where Kelleher’s installation was up against seven other pieces. “This is crazy,” he says of winning the whole shebang, “because this is the town of artists and I just won \$12,000 worth of beer. Plus, if I save the cans, I made another \$72.”

Kelleher said he doesn’t have any big plans on pursuing art as a career; for now, he’s just happy being Lefty. “I’m 52, I’m an old fuck,” he jokes. “I figure after dating all these strippers, it’s going to cost me an arm and a leg, and I’ve already lost an arm. I gotta stop.”

Not that he isn’t pleased as punch to have a good, long supply of free PBR, even if it’s brought a ton of friends out of the woodwork. “This is like the lottery,” Kelleher laughs. “It’s a burden. I have a lot of friends, but I didn’t know they knew where I lived. These guys are all my family around here.” ■