

Collaboration at the CornerHouse

Although most likely not thought of as the art Mecca for which Paris and New York are famous, Iowa has a lot to offer when it comes to talent.

One such showcase of Iowa talent is Janelle and George McClain's CornerHouse Gallery & Frame, headquartered in a turn-of-the-century converted house and conveniently located on Cedar Rapids' First Avenue. "Combining an exhibition venue for contemporary, professional artists of the Midwestern States with a premier state-of-the-art framing studio... the original 1906 building has been expanded to house over 3,000 square feet of gallery space plus the 1,500 square feet onsite-framing studio. In addition to exhibiting emerging and mid-career 20/21st century artists with Midwestern ties, the CornerHouse focuses on the work of Grant Wood, Marvin Cone, Thomas Hart Benton and Conger Metcalf." [www.cornerhousegallery.com]

Janelle, who took classes at the Cedar Rapids Art Center as a child with critiques by Marvin Cone, studied Applied Arts and Education at ISU. A past producing artist and illustrator for the Department of Interior in Alaska, Ms. McClain states that, "George and I believed that if quality, authentic Art and Framing were offered, the public would appreciate what we offered them and would support our efforts. Thirty years later, we have continued faith in the public, our artists and our staff."

With a dual interest and talent in business management and framing, combined with an entrepreneurial spirit, it seemed only natural that Janelle McClain's energies should turn toward a venture such as the art and framing gallery. Since opening their doors in 1976, the McClains have become acquainted with the works of various Midwest artists, and have invited several of them to exhibit at the Gallery. Two eastern Iowa artists included in this group are Sharon Neff of Swisher, Iowa, and Ann Royer of Cedar Rapids, IA.

Sharon Neff has been riding horses since her elementary school days in Keokuk, Iowa, and she has been depicting equines for as long as she can remember. Although she began asking for a pony when she was five

years old ("We can keep him in the garage, Dad."), her urban parents logically denied her requests. She did, however, have rural friends with ponies, and there was "always an extra one to ride." By the time she was 11 years old, her parents finally gave in and bought her a horse of her own to board and ride.

With this keen interest in horses, Sharon began drawing and creating equines at an early age. Recognizing her talent and drive, her parents enrolled her in an art class at



Ann Royer, Sharon Neff, & Janelle MacClain at the CornerHouse Gallery & Frame

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the local YMCA when she was in sixth grade. Although the class was geared toward adults, her mother encouraged her, and she held her own. Here, she created her first book of drawings. The only criticism that she received from her instructor was, "Can you draw ANYTHING besides horses?"

Neff began firing clay models in the backyard behind her house when she was "too young to be playing with fire." Although she is not sure how the idea was planted, she seemed to know instinctively at an early age how to work with clay, which she gathered by digging in the soil. She also knew the method of firing the clay, successfully creating pots.

Growing up in Keokuk, Iowa, Ms. Neff had the world at her back door. She would wander out the back door and enter the Mississippi River bluffs, where she was always searching for something new to pique her interest. During her explorations, Sharon would routinely find something to bring home: a plant, insect, or amphibian, and would ask her mother, "What is this?" Her very wise mother would always answer, "Let's look it up," and so Neff's inquisitive and investigative nature was nurtured. This keen interest in the Natural World is evident in

her work today. Salamanders, birds, snakes, flowers, leaves, a squirrel, frogs, horses, chipmunks, cats, and bees have all found their way into her pottery. Acorns, from Iowa's state tree (the oak) are a signature item in her work.

Ms. Neff received her formal art training and subsequently a BA in Art, at the University of Iowa, where she enrolled in Ceramics, Drawing, Metalworking, and Art History classes, followed by four years of graduate work in Metalworking. Today, she works in stoneware and porcelain, and is the owner of "Fireworks Pottery."

Sharon's husband, Ben, is very encouraging and supportive, both in the artistic realm, and in regards to her horseback riding as well. Neff is a dressage rider (an eventer in her "past life"). She loves dressage because she is "continually learning and progressing with the horse." The term *dressage* means *training*, and Neff loves the non-stagnant nature of the sport. Although she did not have a horse of her own during high school and college years, she was reminded of what

she was missing when she attended a polo clinic in North Liberty, Iowa. She bought one of the polo horses, "Rocky," took lessons from Betsy Coester of Iowa City, and the rest is history.

She is currently aiming for her USDF Bronze Medal on *Pollyanna*, her 10-year-old black Hanoverian mare, while she concurrently creates ceramics at her art studio in Cedar Rapids.

Ann Haakinson Royer's first very colorful exhibit was on (literally!) the sidewalks in her childhood neighborhood in Sioux City, Iowa. Her chalk sidewalk drawings of cows and horses conjure up fond memories for Royer. Royer's family recognized her talents early on, and her grandmother would allow her to "draw all over the walls in her house before she wallpapered." Later, this early practice and talent was rewarded with the challenge of painting huge murals on the walls of St. Mary's Hall dormitory, where she was a student. Here, Miss Olive Peltier, Art Instructor, proved to be very inspirational to Royer. Additionally, Royer participated in the school's Bit and Spur Riding Club, further nurturing her affection for horses and equitation.

At home, Royer's mother requested that she paint designs on her white and



cerise silk chairs as well. "These chairs could use some sprucing up," was the way she proposed the project, and so the young artist came through with paintings of horses. Royer recognizes today how special this request was; as it proved that her family had GREAT trust in her skills and abilities.

After graduation from college, Ms. Royer's first job was procured. She was hired to paint repeating patterns on wallpaper rolls, but that didn't satisfy her creative urges, so she began painting on her own and eventually opened her own studio.

Royer has developed a very unique abstract style, which is easily recognizable. Her bronzes, on the other hand, are very representational. Two of Royer's bronze sculptures are prominently displayed in downtown Cedar Rapids. Ann visits her studio daily; drawing, painting, and sculpting. She is currently finishing a large bronze sculpture for Mount Mercy College. Royer's work has appeared in art exhibitions since 1973, including galleries in Texas, New York City, Minnesota, and even in Jerusalem, Israel! Her work can be found in many permanent collections.

In Royer's own words, "Every time I worked with other animals, I would always return to the horse. Its exquisite form is universal as a war horse, sport horse, or plow horse." And further, "It doesn't bother me if someone doesn't like what I make. I would be upset if a viewer was bored by the work."

Royer's riding career began when she rode Saddle Breeds at an early age with Bill Mountjoy and Daryl & Dick Wallen. Later, at Friendship Farms near Moline, IL, she was very fortunate to have Betsy Steiner as a dressage trainer. It was Betsy and Uva Stiener who found Royer's upper level dressage mount, Condemar, a Westphalian. Both Ann and Condemar, who is celebrating his 36th birthday in May, have now retired from riding.

Today, Ann and her husband, Henry, share several acres with a Beagle, a Doberman, a long-haired Dachshund, a "very interesting mixed breed dog," and several retired thoroughbreds and broodmares.

Neff, Royer, and McClain are in total agreement when it comes to practical art. They feel that surrounding oneself with beautiful things is a direct expression of personality, whether that involves decorating a home or business, or wearing unique clothing and jewelry. Artwork of any form, shared with other people, is a great means for the start of a conversation and possible friendship.

So come to the CornerHouse Gallery, browse, and strike up a friendship with Janelle, Sharon, or Ann. Let artwork open the door.

Gallery Tours:

Early April and October

Special Artist Exhibitions:

Throughout the year

Small Works Show:

Fall 2007 - (date to be announced)

Art and Wine Show:

Summer, 2007, in collaboration with First Avenue Wine House

The First Events:

These are planned events to celebrate the Kenwood Neighborhood and the merchants/food/drink/books/etc. going on here.....exciting and new things happening on The First!!

Watch for them.

