

J. E. KNAUF

PRESS

Art is Sweeter the Second Time Around

Text by Roberta Landman. Photography By Elliot Lincis

There are likely those who would have considered the old Jim Knauf a pretty successful man--someone who could have let well enough alone.



After years of trying, a host of jobs, he had built a reputation as a much-sought-after and oft-imitated pool and landscape designer. His innovative and creative water features and exotic backyard settings had set a standard for excellence, gracing luxury homes and feature articles on the pages of Phoenix Home & Garden. That was all true until five years ago, when the Phoenix resident- then in his mid-40s-chucked it all to pursue his dream of becoming a painter. He has been busy ever since, picking up on the art career he'd shelved two decades ago, and relishing, once more, that sweet feeling of success.

In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the native Californian studied art at Northern Arizona University, and then later earned a bachelor's degree in painting at the University of California at Irvine. where he made an attempt at a career in art, but, with the subsequent responsibilities of marriage and family, turned to other avenues of employment. He and his wife of 19 years, Elaine, have two sons, now 15 and 17.

Reflecting on his first attempt to become an artist, Knauf says, "I didn't have the tools to market my art, and I had to jump into something I could make a living at." Paintings he had executed in the 1970s "were relegated under the bed or given away to relatives and acquaintances."

The paintings he creates today depict people of the Southwest, primarily Native Americans and rodeo riders. His style blends figurative (the people he presents) and non-objective themes (often-chaotic back-grounds). Executed on wood-in fact on doors- with brush strokes and even rag techniques, the mixed acrylic and oil paintings have a translucent and sometimes water-color-like appearance.

Set against abstract backgrounds, the poignant faces of Native Americans entice viewers to take a closer look. That's exactly what Knauf hopes will happen, for, as he says, "Our emotions are tied to faces. That is where a story is told--in the eyes, the mouth--and I want to draw you there.

"I purposely draft the face stronger than any element in a painting but leave out some details, such as high-lights or whites of the eyes," he adds. "My interest is to have you bring something to the painting. I want to leave doors open, so your imagination fills in the gaps. Like a good story, sometimes what you leave out is as good or important as what you put in."

Knauf has no regrets about giving up pool and landscape design, and he thinks a succession of jobs was important to his story, to his becoming an artist. "I painted houses. I refinished old

boats. And when I'd get down into the wood and add a varnish to it, I'd see how beautiful it was. That became something I later brought to my art," he notes. Designing pools, he adds, was simply another form of art.

Unlike two decades ago, Knauf has held fast to his dream of becoming an accomplished artist. This time around, he studied the marketing of paintings and became associated with an art consultant and others in the business who recognized his ability. They helped him get on a fast track to making his work known. He says that through representation in galleries in Scottsdale, in Santa Fe, N.M., and in Denver, his work is now in several private and corporate collections in this country and in Europe.

While building a reputation in the art scene, he has won the admiration of people who become immortalized in his creations. Brothers Klee and Clayson Benally, for instance, appear in Knauf's paintings. Wearing the native dress of ceremonial Navajo dances their family performs nationally and internationally, they are featured in the photograph that accompanies this story. Their father, Jones Benally, and a sister, Jeneda, also have been subjects for Knauf. The family takes pride in being chosen by the artist. "I think he is incredible," Klee, 22, says of Knauf. "He really shows emotion and motion in his work."

Jim Covarrubias, of Mexican and Native American heritage, often poses for photographs that Knauf uses as references for paintings. His face appears in dozens of works.

A writer and artist himself, and active in preserving tribal cultures, Covarrubias says he at first was skeptical about posing for Knauf. "The way people usually present Indians is by glorifying them," says Covarrubias. "I told him 'I'd like you to show the real human being,' and he was very respectful in how he depicted Native Americans."

Knauf, when he studied at NAU, liked to explore Indian reservations, and a college roommate would take him home to his family's cattle ranch outside Wilcox. The experiences provided color for the painter he would later become. Today, he says he attends Indian powwows and rodeos, soaking up the atmosphere and excitement and converting these into works of art--marketable art. To sustain oneself as an artist, one has to know how to make a living, something he's learned from experience.

"My painting career has moved a lot faster than usually happens," Knauf, 49, offers, adding with a laugh, "but it's not like I haven't been thinking about it during the last 20 years."

Albeit good-naturedly, at least one person can't help hoping that the artist might have a change of heart. Terry Jirovsky jokes that he wishes Knauf--"a very talented guy"--would tire of being an artist and go back to designing beautiful pools. Jirovsky is vice president of Pebble Technology Inc., the Scottsdale firm that makes the popular Pebble Tee, a mixture of cement and pebbles used to surface many of today's handsome pools.

Experimenting with the material in the 1980s, "Jim came up with the idea of a pool with natural edges and a beach entry," Jirovsky says. "It's a shame he's gotten out of this."

But Knauf has no plans to give up his dream a second time. Overjoyed at being an artist, he says he often asks himself, "How is it that a man who's almost 50 years old can dance around with paintbrushes and colors and call it going to work?"