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Later-in-Life Painter is the Cat's Meow

By Lou Fancher



Joanne Taeuffer with her art. Photo provided

Taeuffer's 12 acrylic paintings of the family's pet feline on display in the Homework Center at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center now through June.

Growing up on her great, great grandfather's prune farm near Healdsburg in Sonoma County, the now 65-year-old Taeuffer told stories in pictures. With a roll of plain paper and her favorite Christmas present - the all-familiar big box of 64 Crayolas - Taeuffer made animated movies. "I drew a lot of people and animals, just like I do now. I drew comic strips; series of scenes that I'd put in a shoe box, with a hole cut out for a viewer. You'd turn the pencils and see the images go by."

Earning a psychology degree at UC Berkeley, led to work as a journalist. Attending graduate school at USC in new media - what became the internet - captured her interest. She worked for tech companies and founded a company, Blackberry Creek, an online creative community offering digital content created entirely by middle school age kids, combining words and pictures.

So it's not a stretch to imagine that her quest for a significant accomplishment led to more of the same.

"I started with drawing, then turned to paint," she says, describing a process that sounds a bit like Goldilocks testing chairs in a fairy tale. "Watercolor was too precious. Oil paints turned into mud. But someone put acrylic paint into my hand and it was just right."

She took classes with Marcy Wheeler, a Walnut Creek-based artist who offers group courses, and provided valuable lessons. "Marcy told me that if you do something that's really working in one part of a painting, don't do it all across the painting because then it becomes boring. And blocking in light and dark without worrying about color is the way to create good bones for a painting."

The latter discipline, delaying color application for an artist who's fond of layering thick, intensely pigmented paint like frosting with a palette knife, has been a struggle. "I've had many teachers who've told me light and dark matter and I'm not abandoning color, but it's hard to resist."

Confronted in the year 2000 with the turn of the century and hovering close to age 50, Joanne Taeuffer sought culture.

"I decided I was going to learn to paint and learn to speak French. And I did both," she says, rattling off a few phrases en fran•s to demonstrate. "Learning to paint and learning the language have been a gift to me."

The "gifts" are intrinsic, far surpassing the external "who I know/what I've done" rewards of other success, says Taeuffer. After working in internet publishing and journalism, the Berkeley-based painter has been invigorated by "mucking around in paint" and the quirky mannerisms of an elegant, indulged black cat named Oscar.

An exhibit, "Oscar's Excellent Year," features

The "Oscar" paintings show the benefits of repeatedly painting one form. Crusty edges and straightforward realism reminiscent of the work of American artist Wayne Thiebaud are at play in "Meet Oscar." A painting titled "What the Mouse Saw" references Bay Area Figurative Painter David Park. "Once you understand a subject - I paint lots of cats - you're free to try it in different styles," she says.

In her studio, a "granny cottage" tucked behind her second home in Healdsburg, Taeuffer works surrounded by paintings. "I have a tiny house in Berkeley and you can't put a 40-by-60 canvas anywhere in that house. Here, I paint in the kitchen and have things on walls, leaning against doorways, spread out throughout the house."

Taeuffer keeps several paintings going in various stages at one time. "I can never finish one unless there are three more I want to get on with, or I'd not be motivated to finish any of them." Unless she's at a weekly painting session with fellow members of the Bay Area Studio Artists, a longtime group of artists who've become fast friends, Taeuffer prefers painting alone. Classic rock like The Beatles often accompanies her "dance and paint" approach. "I'm always standing. You get your whole body into it. I'd rather not paint a lot of detail. My favorite paintings are kind of blocky and if you sit down, you get into the picky part."

Her most-loved subjects, animals and people, send her up ladders - to shoot a photo from which to paint Oscar, sprawled among the dishes on the breakfast table - or outdoors, to catch a shopper dashing for cover in the rain on a city street. But you won't find Taeuffer outdoors with the plein air crowd: The controlled atmosphere and comfort of air conditioning and heating, she says, were invented for good reason.

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