

THEY LIVE AMONG US

In Curtis Keeler's art, weird is good

BY DIANA COOGLE

If you tell Curtis Keeler his paintings are weird," he'll say, "Thank you." It's a compliment, you see.

On one painting the front end of an old truck juts out from the canvas. On another the upthrust of a Vespa motorcycle breaks into the third dimension. A rooster sort of figure (*what?!*) is riding the motorcycle. The title is "Loco Vesperado a Gogo."

Curtis, a Vietnam veteran, developed his unusual style before moving to Medford in 2011 (and then, three years later, to the Applegate). However, he's been drawing, he says, since he could pick up a pencil or crayon.

Curtis's paintings won the art show contest at the VA Domiciliary in White City three years in a row, but the paintings weren't accepted in the Washington, DC, show, usually a reward for winners. "The judges said, 'Not a painting,'" he explains, although clearly the strongly applied acrylic paint, sometimes stacking up an inch beyond the frame, indicates a painting.

Curtis thinks of his paintings as stories that continue beyond the frame. "I start the story here"—he gestures to the left side of the picture—"and you [the viewer] continue it here," on the right side, just where the frame cuts it off.

"I grew up with five great-uncles and some 30 cousins," Curtis says, explaining his technique. "They were always fishing, camping, swimming, swearing, teasing"—and telling stories. One would begin a story, then another would take it up. Curtis's style is an homage to his uncles and his upbringing.

"I had a black belt in smart-ass by the time I was 17," he says.

Curtis is not formally trained as an artist, although he has taken some online courses—or, at least, he has taken parts of some online courses, whatever he thinks will help him. "Just for a little input, and then I run with it," he says.

In 2013 Curtis's brother, a talented drummer and singer who played with many bands whose members remain even

now Curtis's friends, was dying. Curtis was constantly by his side. Every morning, his brother would say, "Why aren't you painting?"

"He was right," Curtis says. Now, a painter, Curtis puts his brother in every painting.

Personality and personal relationships influence his art. His dog, Seamus, named after a friend Curtis lost 15 years ago, frequently shows up. A boy Curtis built something with once a month for years—three-and-a-half years old when they met; 18 now—"a wonderful part of my life when I needed it," Curtis says—is in a dozen paintings.

His brother, his dog, his young friend—Curtis also loves old vehicles and old barns and puts them in his paintings. (It was old barns, he says, that brought him to the Applegate.) He likes to add broken bits of toys and to make frames from fence posts. He attaches the canvas to plywood to hold up the three-dimensional pieces. He also uses broken toys in building the tiny cabins he sells along with his paintings.

This kind of art draws on Curtis's skill as a carpenter. In Vietnam, he was making maps for pilots. After Vietnam, he "bought an apprenticeship" as a carpenter in Reno,

then got a job cutting stairs and roofs for "the biggest condo builder in the world."

"I loved being a carpenter," he says.

After Vietnam, he didn't much want to be around people, he says. He describes himself as "blunt—and ecstatic with it." He considers "no" a complete sentence.

Being a "socially adept introvert" as he calls himself, Curtis enjoys selling his art at the Applegate Evening Market at the Lindsay Lodge every Wednesday. "I meet 100 people every time," he says. He also sells at wineries and galleries. Next June he will have paintings on display at Awen Winecraft in Medford (awenwinecraft.com), "a good place," he says, "to hang out and answer questions."

If you have questions for Curtis Keeler, you can find him at the Applegate Evening Market through October. In November he will have paintings at Ma Mosa's, in Grants Pass (mamosas.com).

Curtis lives in a place on the Applegate River. He loves it there. "I have everything I need," he says, "the river, food, my dog, and paint."

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Two examples of Curtis Keeler's self-described "weird" art.



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