

JUNCTION

FOR RESIDENTS, BY RESIDENTS

Stroke of Genius

Robert C. Jackson garners global fans with his witty still life portraits

**Also Inside:**

Sue Walter's heart-warming and easy molten chocolate cake recipe
Stephanie Harneson's chic ensembles to turn up the date night heat
Julie Gates' tips to let hygge keep you cozy and content this winter

meet the neighbors

By resident Georgia Jacobs
Photos by Nate Heckenberger





Life's Funny Sometimes

An art-to-art talk with still life painter
ROBERT C. JACKSON

Art imitates life, and nowhere is this more true than in still life paintings, in which artists arrange commonplace items like fruit and flowers, bread and wine, and the occasional dead animal on a table and use *trompe l'oeil* (trick of the eye) techniques to achieve a 3D effect. A former electrical engineer from Kingston, NC, Kennett-based Robert C. Jackson cut his teeth as a self-taught artist painting those traditional, subdued, and somewhat somber subjects. But that got boring, so he put his own spin on still life: colorful vintage soda crates stand-in for a table, and Oreos and milk for bread and wine. His "dead animals" are balloon dogs, collectible figurines, or a goofy stuffed chicken, what he calls nostalgic bits of Americana.

Jackson's oeuvre has a Warholian pop art flavor and a Rockwellian celebration of the good old days, with some Gary Larson-style wry wit thrown in for good measure. It's good-natured like Bob himself – but serious in its precision, also like Bob (he's been working 10 hours a day five or six days a week since 1994 to hone his craft). His paintings are colorful and fun, almost to a childish degree, with titles that beg a closer look. Stacks of Oreos and milk on soda crates

become ironic – social commentary, even – in the context of the title "Fine Dining." Why is a depiction of his signature balloon dogs licking popsicles entitled "Moment of Despair?" (I challenge you to figure it out.) Or the "why" behind the seemingly still-life parody of a vase of flowers made from Coke cans called "What About Bob?" (hint: Rorschach test). Everyone can't help but want to be in on it.

"Art can become wallpaper. You can walk by it and never notice it," Bob says. "I want to create art that is not a trite joke, but something that makes me smile every day."

Art historian and critic Philip Eliasoph called Jackson's paintings "a bundle of contradictions, satirical complexities, and witty subterfuge ... fortified with healthy dosages of non-conforming eccentricity, with a small touch of screwball nuttiness" in his 2012 book, featuring Jackson's work. This dialog between painting and viewer is the reason Jackson has been so successful – he's sold over 900 paintings that hang on the walls of local museums, New York galleries, corporations, and

...





the homes of patrons nationally and internationally. Still, he's just a neighbor who gets honked "hello" when he ventures out of his studio on State Street for a walk or eats his lunch in the local pub. He always wears a smile and has a funny story to tell. He channels that warmth through his brushes onto the canvas. One glance at a "Jackson," and you want to know him better. So here goes ...

CFX: Tell us a little about yourself.

Robert C. Jackson: On the most basic level, I have been married to my high school sweetheart Suzanne for 34 years and have three children: Becca, Tessa, and Luke. We moved to Kennett Square in 2004 and absolutely loved our life here. I've been a full-time artist since 1996 and have exhibited coast to coast.

CFX: How did you transition from electrical engineer to acclaimed artist?

Bob: I became an engineer simply because I was 17 and had no idea what to do and thought because it was one of the toughest majors. I could do anything if I could do that. During my senior year, I took my first and only college painting class and immediately knew it was what I wanted to do with my life. I took an engineering job upon graduation with every intention of quitting in the future to be an artist. It took me 10 years to finally attack

it full-time. It wasn't easy, and at the beginning, it was hand-to-mouth living, but I was certainly happier! Being an engineer first led me to be strategic about my art career. I knew right away that I needed to be a national artist as opposed to local or regional if I was going to make this my sole career.

CFX: How did your style evolve, and why still life?

Bob: I was a rabid fan of art once I actually discovered art. When I first started painting, we were living in D.C., and I'd make the trek to the free museums to look and look. Further, my art book collection is ridiculously large and as a result, I really knew what I liked, and for some reason, still life really spoke to me. Still life allows an artist a bunch of control. In some ways, it allows a painter to be like a sculptor in that you choose interesting objects, figure out how to arrange them in an engaging narrative, but then as a painter, you immortalize it on canvas. When I first started, I painted still life like you are supposed to do – bottles, fruit, flowers, etc. That is fine but wasn't for me for very long. I got bored with painting objects just to make a pretty painting. For me, art is dialog. I want the viewer to become communicative with a piece of art more than just saying "that's pretty" or "I know that place."

...



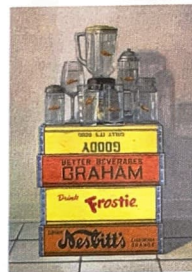
Moment of Despair 24 x 72



Where's Bob? By Nate Heckenberger



Confused 40 x 30



Temporary Housing 40 x 30



Dream Home 40 x 30



What About Bob 40 x 30



Master Class 40 x 30



Fine Dining 24 x 54



...

CFX: Much has been written about your work, but how do you define it?

Bob: I aim to create work that a collector can live a lifetime with and still find engaging, and that when the collector has visitors over, the guests find it necessary to go over, look, and ask the owner about it. Kind of like songs. There are some that you listen to a little and like them, but eventually, you forget about them or get bored with them. Then there are others that become part of you and join the soundtrack of your life. On a basic level, I create representational narrative art with a nostalgic pop bent!

CFX: Describe your sense of humor and how it's reflected in your work?

Bob: I find it such a challenge and so rewarding to include humor in my work. I find life oddly perplexing, idiosyncratic, and something that you just have to laugh at. It's funny in a wry way. Heck, you have to laugh at it, or it's over! So, I try to paint work with an askew view of life that offers a smile.

CFX: What is your favorite medium, and why did you settle on this?

Bob: Remember, I didn't go to art school. I regret that I never did etchings, lithos, egg tempera, encaustics, etc. I started with oils. But, honestly, I loved them. They smelled like art, and they took just enough time to dry that I could blend them in a way I liked, mix

them comfortably, and they had a time-tested history. Of course, I have dabbled with some other mediums like watercolors, acrylics, and pastels, but oil was so strong of an immediate preference for me. I tried them on panels or smoother surfaces than linen, but I found I liked the tooth and grab of the linen more.

CFX: Tell us about your props and how they appear in your work.

Bob: Early on, I saw how important it was for artists to stand out from the pack. There are many ways this happens – sheer talent can be one way, another is composition and color arrangements, and yet another is the subject the artist chooses. I really wanted to be one of those artists that when you see a piece from across the room, you don't wonder who did it because it is obvious. Hopefully, my skill shows through, but I do think there are a couple of props that are obviously mine. One is vintage soda crates. As a still life painter, I really wanted to get away from objects just sitting on a tabletop. When I found my first soda crate in an antique shop, I became hooked. They became a perfect surface for setting up my arrangements. They are brightly colored, have wonderful text and logos, and an inherent nostalgia. Other props I adore include balloon dogs (nostalgia, fantastic colors, and allow for a personality in a still life) and Oreos (such a warm fuzzy for so many folks, and I like their stark black and white addition to a painting).

...

...

CFX: Where do you get your ideas and inspiration?

Bob: Everywhere. You better watch out; something you may say could trigger something for me! My kids have laughed at me because scrawled on the sides of school programs, church bulletins, newspaper borders, and anything I can get my hands on are "ideas." It might be a word I hear, a phrase, or something I see that sparks the germ of an idea. I carry a sketchbook almost always or transfer these various notes to it later and figure out if the idea would make a good painting. I never paint just for the sake of painting or because I see a scene or setup. They all begin with an idea. They almost always start with a title or theme before the picture is even in my mind. I then try to sketch it out. Sometimes I have to keep playing with the thought in a word association kind of way, getting it to the point it can be portrayed. Then there has to be a great marriage between the initial concept and the eventual well-executed craft.

CFX: Describe the artist's life.

Bob: Being an artist is a pretty solitary occupation. Depending on the size, my paintings can take from a week to a month to complete, so for weeks on end I'm tinkering about in a small space. And I love it. I have sketchbooks full of ideas and never find myself sitting around wondering what to do next. Much more likely is that I'm trying to narrow down my options to the one I think is "best." I do think my art is much more of a biography that people realize; my thoughts all end up there.

CFX: Describe the moment you first felt you had "made it."

Bob: Honestly, in the beginning, I just wanted to make a living doing what I loved, be a good husband and Dad. So, did I expect museums to collect my work? Nope. And each time it happens, it's like a new scoop of gravy on the meal. But as for a moment to feel "made" – I've never felt that. For me, this has been hundreds of steps and still hundreds more to come. I'm definitely thinking, "what next," while in the midst of the present. In some ways, that's just how this career has to work. If you aren't moving forward, you're probably moving backward.

CFX: Which painters have inspired you most as an artist?

Bob: It's really my friends and peers from around the country. Of course, I admire so many artists, and my art book collection is pretty much second to

none. There are so many "favorite" artists for me, but growth and inspiration come from dialog and engagement. I've never hesitated to reach out to the artists whose work has intrigued me. Thus, many of the artists I initially admired have become close friends.

CFX: What is one of your funniest moments?

Bob: Hands down, people, asking me if I can make my own balloon dogs. Rarely do they ask me if I can actually paint what they see. I used to joke with people, saying, "It is an incredibly difficult process that only the finest craftsmen can handle. So I keep a clown on retainer ..."

CFX: What about difficult moments?

Bob: On an artwork level, drawing out the composition is the most tedious. I love messing around in my sketchbooks, and I love the whole painting process, it's that in-between part that I would choose to avoid if I could! In some ways, that is where the math and composition come into play, just laying it out to make sure it "works."

On a personal level, it was when I fell off a ladder in front of my studio and landed on my back on the sidewalk, cracking ribs and four vertebrae. You can still see the yellow paint on my front step and sidewalk. I happened to be painting a rare self-portrait at the time, so it ended up becoming my most personal and difficult painting. With a brace, I walked back and forth to look in the mirror and used those steps to try to heal. That became a life-sized self-portrait (but I decided to omit the brace) titled "Myself as a Still Life" – and yes, the irony is purposeful.

CFX: What advice do you have for aspiring artists?

Bob: Don't expect any one thing to "make it" for you. There was no one magazine article for me, it's the 100 I've had. It's not one exhibition I have had, rather the persistent, continual showing of my work, year after year and planning into the future. No single sale or collector: It's all of the over 900 paintings I've sold. You just have to keep at it and keep at it more. You have to work hard, paint every day, and if opportunities aren't coming your way, you have to create them yourself.

