

PHOTOS BY KENNETH MENKE

Menke's work frequently features Western iconography, especially the American bison, seen here in "A Lot of Bull."



Shades of the West

Watercolorist Kenneth Menke rooms with the buffalo

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Western paintings populate the walls of watercolorist Kenneth Menke's buffalo-inspired room in his Tallahassee home. There's also a sculpture from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and living over the fireplace is a set of longhorns from Dallas, Texas. His wife, who is an artist as well, even bought a buffalo-decorated throw to adorn the love-seat where Menke spends his time reading and letting his imagination motivate his artwork.

Currently, his favorite painting is the one that greets him upon entering the room's interior. Titled, "Shade of Thunder," this work features a buffalo in mostly tans and browns, creating the essence of the animal. While he doesn't paint in the room due to low light, Menke much prefers using the sunroom where he has set up his supplies.



Danny in Red by Kenneth Menke.

IF YOU GO

What: In the Yellow Chair
When: Times vary, May 19-22 and 26-28, with an Artists Happy Hour from 5-7 p.m. on May 26
Where: 621 Gallery, 621 Industrial Drive
Cost: Free
Contact: For more information, visit 621gallery.org/

Nonetheless, these knickknacks and western memorabilia all pay homage to Menke's Nebraskan roots.

"I've painted quite a few buffalo and I'm running out of titles," smiles Menke. "I like to be a little imaginative when I title my work. One I've done for the Tallahassee Watercolor Society Tri-State Show is in wilder colors than I usually use, so it's titled 'A Lot of Bull.'"

Color theory ranks high in importance for Menke. He prefers using the three primary colors in what he terms as a limited palette. He'll mix and skew colors based on what he identifies as the dominant hue in a painting. However, he openly admits that brown has always been his favorite color. As a child, his coloring books were full of earth tones, with the tan-colored crayon worked down to a nub. Menke believes this was the first of his fledgling attempts to emulate leather.

For many years, Menke's background in art was limited to the margins of his notebooks at business meetings. He earned Accounting and Economics degrees from Northwest Missouri State and Central Missouri State Universities, served in the Army, and later became a financial analyst and investment manager. Now retired at 72, he is shaping his artistic style by assessing what a painting needs versus mimicking colors found in photographs or other source materials.

"Many people pick up a guitar and try to be Elvis, and though they never will be, they can do Elvis' songs in their own fashion," says Menke. "It's the same way with painting. You're not Rembrandt or Van Gogh, and I think everybody needs to find their own way because expressing yourself is what it's all about."

Committed to sketching and painting when business would send him on the road, he got in the habit of carrying a small notebook along with a set of watercolors. In the midst of traveling through hotels and airports, the portability of the medium was freeing because all that it takes to activate the paint is water, an easily accessible resource in most places Menke visited.

He enjoys the spontaneity of watercolors especially, with western history as a major inspiration, and portraiture serving as his main conduit into a different era or even just a moment in time. Menke says portrait work has improved his observation skills, and he finds himself drawn to snapping photos or storing a memory of interesting faces. He recalls sitting in Houston's airport as a group of passengers deplaned, noting their proportions and diversity.

"It was a perfect parade of profiles and I was sitting there mesmerized," says Menke. "Everyone is so

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distinctive and potentially interesting to put down on paper, and without doing artwork I wouldn't have noticed. It changes your perspective and the way you look at the world."

As a child, he watched his mother paint in acrylics, and clearly recalls a drawing assignment in fourth grade that called upon his own artistic nature. The teacher rolled out a large stretch of construction paper and invited each student to contribute an artful interpretation from Nebraskan history.

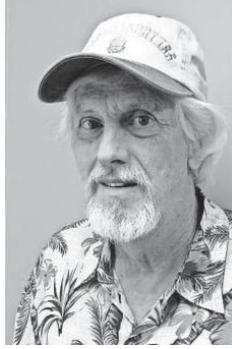
Menke, ecstatic and confident in his drawing skills, chose to sketch out a cowboy riding a horse. Glancing at a classmate's drawing of a stagecoach jumping to life, he was consequently humbled and impressed, and ultimately spurred on to better his own work.

"Occasionally you just find those people who can just really do it," says Menke. "I don't claim to be one of those people but on the other hand, art can be learned. People talk about having talent but there's also just hard work."

Though he admits to working in spurts and bursts, Menke attends weekly classes at the Tallahassee Senior Center, and has shown in numerous regional exhibitions, receiving recognition for his paintings. He says his biggest takeaways are the refrains to "be loose" and "go dark," meaning to have a relaxed brushstroke and continually apply the paint, as watercolors tend to dry lighter.

As President of the Tallahassee Watercolor Society, he leads board meetings, oversees two annual art shows, and is proud of their partnership with Tallahassee Memorial Hospital, providing art for cancer and rehab centers. Additionally, Menke comes into contact with great contemporary watercolorists via workshops and enjoys learning new techniques. In the fall, he is looking forward to taking classes with Janet Rogers who specializes in portrait work — a passion that he shares.

"When she gets the paint on her brush she puts it



Menke

civil war scenes.

Another project centers on Louis and Clark's great Western expedition. Menke read journals and books, and has traveled to important historical sites in Montana. He researches tidbits like nationality, height, and distinctive features of those that went on this journey. Even the context of the surrounding environment provides details that coalesce into a portrait.

"I really appreciate that authenticity which is the opposite of what so many watercolorists do," says Menke. "I enjoy being picky. If you're doing a portrait of a historical figure, you want to do right by them."

Menke says capturing a face can reveal much about a person, or at least what you imagine that they've experienced, which he hopes will project certain emotions. While this is harder to do with models in a limited amount of time, Menke enjoys the challenge it provides in his Monday classes in the Tallahassee Senior Center Portrait Lab. He and fellow artists have worked hard at capturing the essence of a figure in space, in their own unique oil, pastel, charcoal, pencil, and of course, Menke's watercolor, renderings.

Seated in the center's well-worn yellow chair, mod-

down and it's there, whereas I kind of sneak up on these things" describes Menke. "I put a little bit down cautiously and then I'll put some more down. She is able to do a marvelous job of what I'd like to do."

Forefront in Menke's process is planning, perhaps reflected in his meticulous approach, and he looks up to artists like Howard Terpning and Mort Kunstler who share an acute attention to historically accurate depictions of western and

Tallahassee Watercolor Society's 28th Tri-State Juried Water Media Exhibition

What: The Tallahassee Watercolor Society brings an explosion of color to the local art world with the 28th Tri-State Juried Water Media Exhibition. Each year the Society sponsors a regional competition for artists using watercolor and acrylic mediums in a variety of styles and subject matter. Artists from across Florida, Alabama and Georgia enter their paintings to compete for several awards. Don Andrews, the exhibit's judge, is a graduate of the Ringling School of Art and is a member of the American Watercolor Society. Fifty-four artists have been chosen and 59 paintings will fill the walls of FSU's Museum of Fine Art. **When:** Daily hours are 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday and 1-4 p.m. Saturday **Where:** FSU's Museum of Fine Art, 250 Fine Arts Building, 530 W. Call St.

els pose for 20 minutes as the artists work quickly to paint, sketch, and draw. In the 10-minute breaks, Menke says he and his fellow artists will walk around and see what others are doing, and in the spirit of friendship and camaraderie, give feedback. They will showcase their work for the first time together at 621 Gallery as part of "In the Yellow Chair," through May 28, and he is looking forward to not only showing off portraiture, but also demonstrating how many different viewpoints can be taken on any one person.

"This brings our work from the past two years together in a cohesive manner and is put together in a way that hopefully the broader community can appreciate," says Menke. "Art grabs your attention and is an opportunity to make a statement. We all work a little differently and seeing the large body of our work on display together tells a story you don't see otherwise."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).