

The art of crafting a career to suit a restless mind

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By **Bruce T. Paddock**



West Cornwall artist, illustrator and author Ken Krug has a new display of his work at the Souterrain Gallery. Photo by Bruce T. Paddock

WEST CORNWALL — For any artist, preparing a gallery show can be an exercise in winnowing. You have your favorite pieces, of course, and the ones you feel highlight your skills or certain aspects of your work. But those aren't the only considerations. From conceptual criteria such as the theme of the show to mundanities such as the size and shape of the gallery's walls, circumstances force you to, in the words of English writer Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, murder your darlings.

Consider, then, how much more difficult the process must be for Ken Krug.

When he and Bianca Langner Griggs started planning his new show at Griggs' Souterrain Gallery in West Cornwall, the first thing they had to consider was category.

You see, Krug is an illustrator, producing drawings and paintings for both fiction and nonfiction books. But he also creates fine art paintings, both representational and somewhat more abstract. As a graphic designer, he's developed everything from posters to packaging. And he designs textiles, which should probably be its own separate category.

Throw in author (of children's books) and teacher (at New York City's Fashion Institute of Technology in both Communication Design and Textile Design), and you have a polymath of a fairly high order.

Tight florals

Perhaps part of the explanation for the breadth of Krug's work lies in his career trajectory.

"I've always painted. I have a degree in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute. I got out of art school and spent the next eight years or so working construction with all my buddies from art school. Because that's what everybody did at the time — all the women I went to art school with became waitresses, and all the guys became house painters or worked in construction. "At a certain point, I was just tired. We were painting lofts in New York City. But not living lofts. For some reason we got hooked into a group of Russian guys who were opening knitting factories. We were prepping them; we were putting up walls and painting them. It was very tedious. It was 5,000 square feet of spray-painting ceilings ..." Here he bends backward with his face and torso pointing upward. "... like this all day.

"So I said to my partner, 'Y'know, I know how to draw and paint. I'm going to find a job in commercial art where I can sit at a desk.'

"I answered an ad — I didn't even know it was a textile design studio. The ad said, 'the ability to paint tight florals.' I had been doing these very odd still lifes of flowers — odd in the sense that I would combine things that you wouldn't think of in a still life, like toy soldiers or strange rocks. They weren't pretty little flower pictures, but they were very, very tightly executed.

"So I went, and they said, 'You don't know anything about textile design, but we can teach you that. But you really know how to paint, and that we can't teach you.' So they hired me, and I learned on the job."

Perhaps those eight years Krug spent not working in a creative environment, like a drag racer revving the engine and spinning the wheels before putting the car into gear or a cartoon character whose legs are a blur while its body hasn't started moving forward yet, are the reason he spread out into so many different areas.

A peripatetic life

Or, maybe he just has a hard time committing to a single thing. Such as homes. He and his wife, Liz Van Doren, share an apartment in New York with their daughter, Lily, and a friendly terrier named Rosie. But they also have a cottage in West Cornwall. And another one in the Catskills.

"That one I came into the marriage with. We're trying to sell it," he explains, standing in the charming, if alarmingly low-ceilinged, vintage West Cornwall

cottage. “My wife’s parents had this house. We mostly used to rent in Cornwall. But now they’re in Geer Village, and we’re here all the time.”

Words come first

If nothing else, at least one aspect of Krug’s career trajectory seems fairly straightforward. His authorial debut, “No, Silly,” was published last year, and a second book is on the way. So, after illustrating a number of children’s books, he approached one of his clients about writing one as well, right?

Umm ... no.

“This actually came about because I did the illustrations for Michelle Obama’s garden book. I sent out an e-mail blast: ‘Hey! I did the illustrations for Michelle Obama’s garden book.’

“Some of the people I sent it to are in children’s books. When one of them e-mailed back with congratulations, I said, ‘Can I send you a book I wrote?’ She said sure.

“Then, about two months later, I got a letter back saying, ‘Well, it doesn’t really resonate with me, but thank you.’ And I replied, ‘Oh! Can I send you another one?’

“I sort of heard through the grapevine that she thought, ‘Oh, God. I’m gonna have to reject another one of his books?’ But she loved that one, and they published it.”

Aspiring writers shouldn’t think that’s the whole story. “I’ve written about 10 kids’ books,” Krug said. “This was the first one that I sold. It’s been maybe five years of writing and sending things out.”

So which comes first, the words or the images?

“Even though I primarily work as an artist, in the books it’s a little bit different. The text, for me, has always come before the pictures. I get an idea for something and I write it. Then the drawing comes.”

And the drawing leads to painting. All of the illustrations in “No, Silly” are oil paintings.

Which brings us back to the Souterrain Gallery show. Krug decided it should focus on his paintings. Some are fine art; others are from the book. Copies of the book are on sale as well. The show remains up until Sept. 25.

For his career in general, though, he has no intention of narrowing it down.

“I know people — friends of mine who are fine artists — who would hate this. They’d think you have to ‘keep it pure.’ Don’t do commercial art.

“But I love doing a lot of different things. I can say, ‘I really want to paint crazy plaids because they’re fun to paint, and I think I can incorporate that into fine art.’

“And then I’ll have some new fine art technique and I’ll say, ‘maybe I can do some commercial art with that.’

“I love how everything feeds from one to the other.”