Artist Rocky Perkins works on a portrait of six family members in his Spanish Town apartment. To the left is a recently finished work. Perkins has led an interesting life and now feels he is on the brink of making it in the big time.

Artist Perkins hopes fame lies ahead for him

By KAREN MARTIN
Advocate staff writer

Maybe it's something in the name Rocky that makes survivors of those who have it. Certainly fighters Rocky Graziano and fictional champ Rocky Balboa had the survival instinct. So does Rocky Perkins.

While Perkins' talent is on canvas, it's not the canvas of the boxing ring. Perkins is a local portrait artist who seems to be gaining quite a reputation for his work.


"It's funny how things workout," comments Perkins, seated before a canvas, the light streaming through the upstairs window of his Spanish Town apartment. "I've probably had 15 different jobs, from offshore worker to jazz musician and everything in between. But I never had any job for any length of time."

The only constant in his 45 years has been his compulsive need to draw, says Perkins. Now, the artist says with all modesty, he feels he's on the brink of greatness. Perkins says he will one day be "the best portrait painter in the United States."

With that goal in mind, he also is developing a new style of painting. He describes this new style as a combination of photo realism with abstract art. The idea, he says, is his paintings will seem three-dimensional without the fish-eye effect.

"I'm going to be famous for it," Perkins says, adding with a depreciating charm that talented people must have a certain amount of ego. "You have to believe strongly in yourself because no one is going to do it for you."

He plans to further refine his talents studying at the Academie des Beaux Arts in Paris this summer. Referring to the Andy Warhol quote that everyone enjoys 15 minutes of fame, Perkins comments: "It's going to be my turn pretty soon, and it's going to be for more than 15 minutes. Anyone who works as hard as I do, and who is as technically proficient, it's just a matter of working out the business end of it."

But business, as Perkins' story shows, has proved a hazard in the past. He says he's learned from his mistakes.

"It's going to be my turn pretty soon, and it's going to be for more than 15 minutes. Anyone who works as hard as I do, and who is as technically proficient, it's just a matter of working out the business end of it."

Merchant Marines. But you can, and they did," says Perkins. Perkins spent the first half of his Army tour in Japan playing piano in officers' clubs. From there, he was sent to the front lines of Vietnam.

"After Japan, my tour was a nightmare," Perkins says. "I was shipped to Vietnam in 1966. I was wounded three times in six months. It was pretty scary."

His injuries led to a stint in a special services unit.

"I found out about this all-rock 'n roll band that needed a bass player," Perkins says. "I had never played bass before, but I play it like the first four strings of a guitar and got a spot. For six months we traveled all over entertaining the troops. It was an incredible experience."

While better than active duty, Perkins laughs that band members did get pretty tired of playing the most-requested tune of the day - "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" by The Animals. Eventually returning to the States, Perkins says that like many veterans, he had a hard time readjusting to civilian life.

March 1, 1991, Page 1C, col. 2
Rocky Perkins displays complementary portraits of two sisters which he recently painted.
"I got pretty crazy for a while," he says. "I got divorced. I mean I was crazy—drinking and all that kind of stuff."

He entered the University of California at Berkeley, where he says "I was given a tube of fingerpaint and told to do my own thing."

Immersing himself in art, Perkins began to rediscover himself. But he wasn't long for the Berkeley campus, finding himself the "token realist" among an army of abstract painters.

Perkins married again and decided to return to Lafayette, where he enrolled in the University of Southwestern Louisiana, eventually getting a degree in biology.

In the early 1980s, after spending time in the oil field, as a French radio disc jockey and as a street artist in New Orleans' Jackson Square, Perkins says he settled down to make his living as a painter. He was commissioned to paint then-Gov. Edwards, and also did a portrait of Willie Nelson after meeting the singer at a Maurice camp on the Vermilion River.

All seemed to be going well, despite another divorce, when Perkins became involved with a map-making enterprise—those cartoon-looking poster maps that cities all over the country were having made.

Perkins' business took off, doing so well that he hired several other artists to work for him. To Perkins' shock and horror, one artist included racist material on one of the maps.

Discovered after the map already had been printed, the resulting scandal ruined Perkins' business and personal life.

"I'm even hesitant to mention this because it was such nasty business," says Perkins. "I really don't want to relive that time. I am not a racist, but a lot of people thought so... Everything just came tumbling down. I lost my house, my car, my business. Everything."

Were it not for the disastrous episode, however, Perkins might still be spending his days as the entrepreneur instead of the artist.

Penniless, Perkins says he decided to again take up his brush.

"I guess I wasn't cut out to be a businessman," he says philosophically. "I'm best doing a solitary kind of thing, like painting."

Since returning to the canvas, Perkins has been delighted with his "word of mouth" success.

"This can be a lucrative business if you're good, and I am," says Perkins, adding that many artists today don't learn the basic mechanics of drawing before tackling oils and watercolors.

"I've been drawing for years and it's important you stay with it," he says, noting his biology degree combined with his good, basic training has helped him in realistically rendering the human body in all its many forms.

Calling himself a workaholic, Perkins says he often spends eight to 12 hours a day at his easel.

"It's true what they say. It is 2 percent inspiration and 98 percent perspiration," Perkins says. "It's work, work, work."

That's not to say he doesn't have time to fit a little music in his life, or to enjoy time with his five children.

Perkins likes to spend his Sundays at the predominantly black Belfair Baptist Church, where he occasionally plays piano.

"I'm originally a jazz guy," he says, sliding around on his bench to face his organ. "I'll play 'Amazing Grace,' but I'll throw in a little of this," he says, embellishing the hymn with a jazzy rhythm. "I just really enjoy it, and they (church-goers) just eat that up."

He also plays guitar in a little blues band that gets together from time to time.

"Now, the sky's the limit," he says.