Characters come to life in his artistic hands

By Druann Domangue
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His eyes. They stand out as the central focus in a seemingly ordinary painting of a black shoe shine man. They tell the story of years of experience, stories swapped over a good shine, and of an impatience for the artist who won't go away and leave him alone.

The eyes. They bring the painting to life and draw the viewer back time and again, long after the subject, George Butler, has died and the artist has finished the last brush stroke.

His eyes. They speak of years of artistic experience, of a man who has perfected a technique and knows how to put a person's character, not just his face, onto a piece of canvas.

Although George Butler, the subject, is gone, the artist, Rocky Perkins, remains. In fact, he's back, after leaving the area to pursue yet another career away from the oils.

But the smell of fresh paint and the draw of a blank canvas has brought him back to his first love, painting, and his hometown, Lafayette.

Perkins made his fame locally in the early 1980s as a portrait painter and artist who specialized in romantic, 19th Century realism. He has painted Edwin Edwards' face while he was governor, country singer Willie Nelson's guitar, and scenery so real you must catch yourself before you reach out to touch it.

He's recently completed Governor Roemer's likeness, and although he continues to do portraits, Perkins is back in town to concentrate on painting sights and people from the Acadiana area.

Perkins talked to The Advertiser about his plans for the future. Perkins, who's in his 40s said, "The first half of my life is over. I want the last half to amount to something."

To that end, Perkins is working almost around the clock developing a new style which he hopes will appeal to the public.

Cypremont Point is the focus of his latest oil simply titled, "The Point." A small boat bobs on the churning water as storm clouds roll in. This work has been reproduced on prints, and is currently available at two local galleries, Le Jeune's Frameworks and at Cyprian Gallery.

Perkins has been spending considerable time out at Cypremont Point, because "it's one hour away, yet it's another world completely. The pace is relaxed, and the easy-going atmosphere is conducive to work," said Perkins.

He is planning a one-man show sometime in the Spring, and it will feature oils of the area scenery, the local fishermen, and pictures of the homeless. Perkins likes to paint the homeless because their faces tell a story. He is planning to paint an oil of a character named Dalton, a man who, for years, walked up and down Pinhook and lived in boxes. Prior to his death, Perkins shot many pictures of him, and he is anxious to put his memories of the man on canvas.

Painting portraits is not as simple as the quick character sketch you might pick up in Jackson Square in New Orleans, although Perkins has been right there with his own cart. It takes weeks of work, plenty of sittings, and the time and energy required to get a feeling for the person's character.

Perkins doesn't paint solely from a photograph. It's just a guide. Years of training and practice go into getting that person's inner self onto the canvas. "To do it right, you have to be there. There's no life in a picture, and you can't just copy a photograph," said Perkins.

Artistic training usually starts with a basic talent which is discovered at an early age. Perkins followed up this talent with intensive studying, both in New York at the Brooklyn Museum and at Berkeley in California. A degree in biology, with a minor in anatomy, helped strengthen his technique and ability to accurately transfer his images from his mind or sight onto the canvas.

At Berkeley, the professors preferred abstract art, and downplayed his realistic efforts. One night, after pushing to meet an art class deadline and not coming up with anything usable, Perkins grabbed some motorcycle parts lying around on the floor (he lived with bikers), slapped them on plywood, painted them and turned them in.

The professors loved his work, raving about his technique and motivation. Perkins thought it was a huge joke.

Preferring to stick to realism, Perkins likes to display his ability to get the brush strokes just right, the proper muscle tone and bone structure in place, and if people label him an illustrator, well, he can live with that.

He's working on a new technique which will combine both worlds, abstract and realism. Using trees and scenery, Perkins work envelops the viewer with photo montages. Fractionalized and distorted, yet recognizable, the oils will feature a realistic depiction of a person or scene in the center of the work, with fuzzy abstracts around the edges. Perkins hopes the viewer will feel drawn into the painting.

To his knowledge, no one else in the United States has pulled off such an effect, and he's hoping to create his own little niche in the art world with this multi-layered look at life and Acadiana.

Multi-layered is probably the best description of Perkins as an individual. A karate enthusiast with a black belt, Perkins is also accomplished on piano and guitar.

From piano player during the Vietnam War to an artist living in New York in the 60s, Perkins has a past which would make for an interesting novel.

He hopes the new decade will be filled with less colorful stories, much hard work, and oils which people will easily identify as "his original." Whether he's painting a graceful oak tree or himself as a Spanish warrior, Perkins' work is never dull. There is something new to see each time you glance at a piece. He took Lafayette by storm in the early 1980's, and there's a good possibility that he will do the same in the 90s now that he's focused and back on track.