Pettit: ‘Creativity thrives on freedom’

By Bob Hamm

Among Lafayette’s best kept secrets is the fact that this city has produced one of the world’s leading marine artists. It’s such a well-kept secret that few people seem to know about the remarkable accomplishments of native son Rick Pettit.

Nor in Paris, where he recently exhibited at Parc Oceanique Cousteau after the Cousteau Society commissioned five Pettit watercolors.

Nor in Hawaii where his powerful painting, “The Gathering Place,” was reproduced as the cover of the telephone directory for all the islands.

Nor in Chicago, where he has been featured artist at the Big Sur, Monterey and California Marine Art Expos, and where his painting “Baubles and Bangles” was chosen as the official poster of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Gary Koeppel, owner of major art galleries in Hawaii and California, says it is agreed that Pettit is one of the top three marine artists in the world. “I would rank him as number one,” Koeppel says.

Collectors of marine art see Rick as unique among marine artists of international stature because his work is vibrant and alive, he adds. “He chooses to be daring and adventurous instead of clinging to the safety of a style or subject matter that has been successful in the past.”

At the 1990 Marine Art Expo on Maui, about 50 of the world’s most discerning collectors of marine art purchased original Pettit watercolors. Yet, many Lafayette residents who have bought an official poster at the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans are probably unaware that the beautiful painting it features is by this 1977 graduate of Lafayette High School.

Underlying his remarkable talent is a deep love for marine creatures which had its beginning here in Cajun Country. From early childhood, he collected virtually every type of marine creature indigenous to Acadiana’s wetlands.

“Creativity thrives on freedom,” he says, and while my dad and brother hunted or fished, I marched up and down the levee with a dip net, scooping up every kind of creature. Others either caught things to eat or caught things they threw back. I brought everything home and put it in my aquarium.”

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from him that if you project the image you want to live up to, you'll probably achieve it. Just as importantly, he gave me some business sense. Understanding business and being comfortable dealing with high-powered executives is not altogether common to people in the arts."

In high school, Pettit had no interest in the quick, bold medium of watercolors - the medium that would eventually gain him international reknown. He entered Louisiana Tech at Ruston to study graphic design and enrolled in a watercolor course only because it was an available elective.

M. Douglas Walton, renowned watercolorist and lecturer, was his instructor. "I've never seen a more gifted teacher," Pettit says. "He has a very scientific, very learned approach to art. He worked us hard - two paintings per class period. And along with all the age-old principles, he gave me a precious gift - the freedom to fail...freedom from the fear of failing."

"Because of Doug Walton, I can take risks - trying new things. If it doesn't work, I can throw it away and move on. It's freedom, and I think creativity thrives on freedom."

Pettit still subscribes to Walton's theory that "there are no starving artists, only lazy ones."

At the end of his senior year at Tech, Pettit vacationed with his family in Hawaii, and made a firm decision that this would eventually be his home. One more visit to the islands clinched it. Shortly thereafter, he packed his bags, gave away his remaining possessions, and set out to meet his destiny.

He worked 18 hours a day - as a commercial artist by day and a waiter by night - but found time to paint for his own pleasure, and, because of Walton, his pleasure was in watercoloring.

In 1983, he was invited to show his work at an exhibit at a marine theme park. He was too busy waiting tables to be present, but people saw his work, and his phone began to ring. He sold every painting he had - and his career was under way. Within four years, he was one of the most collected marine artists in the world.

Appropriately, Pettit equates the excitement of painting with the excitement of the sea. "When I step up to the easel, I feel like a deep sea diver about to make a journey to his favorite haunt. Things will be familiarly in place, like they always were. But this time there will be something new that has ridden in on the current and brought a different beauty to the setting. It's a paradox: never changing, always new."

Pettit is exact in rendering the structural anatomy of his sea creatures, but his concern with realism ends there. "I'm not concerned with capturing the precious details of life," he says, "but rather the essence of life itself." And so his anatomically exact sea creatures inhabit an underwater fantasy world where natural coloration gives way to arbitrary, bursting colors, muted hues, spatters, drips and a sense of swirling motion. His "very wet" dry brush technique and unique style are highlighted by a marvelous sensitivity in the handling of light, mass, movement and brilliant color.

Rick Pettit paints in a studio on an upper floor of the only high rise building in Kailua, by a window that looks out on white sand and blue Hawaiian waters. He usually completes a painting in a single day - not because of his immense energy and drive, but because of his conviction that one of the most important things in art is knowing when to stop. "I don't subscribe to the 'get in and get lost' theory of art," he says. "I set a time limit. Get in and get out. When I start to paint, I have a sort of time bomb feeling - too much time and it will explode on me."

He recommends that young people intent on a career such as his study graphic art and learn the principles of discipline, color theory and design. "Only when you know the rules can you afford to break them," he says. "Then you can take the risks, and begin to be innovative."

Thirteen years out of Lafayette High School, Rick Pettit is considered the most innovative of today's internationally acclaimed and collected marine artists.