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An Artist's Life

Artist Tom Christopher's Americana-filled South Salem house

BY: SUSAN HODARA PUBLISHED JUNE 21, 2008 AT 06:01 AM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN O'DONNELL

The subject of Tom Christopher's paintings may be the bustle of Manhattan, but his home in South Salem—where he lives with his wife, Dawn, their two teenage sons, a ferret, a parrot, a dog named Ginger, and a pond full of fish—is filled with memorabilia from the heart of America. Christopher's collections, garnered from flea markets, junk stores, and antiques shops, include wooden shoeshine kits and transistor radios. "I mainly look for things that aren't made to be art, but serve another purpose," he says.

Christopher grew up in Pasadena, California, where he studied art and design. In 1981, he moved to Queens, hating New York City until one day, when he was walking down Broadway, the sun broke through the clouds. "It was an epiphany," he says. "The light was so bright, like a Caribbean island. I saw all the characters—the grifters and the con men, the bicycle messengers whizzing by. It was all so beautiful."

Since then, Christopher has become known across the globe for his cityscapes of Manhattan. His paintings are in the collections of such noted organizations as CBS, the Museum of the City of New York, and Time Warner and are owned by former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and First Lady Laura Bush. In addition to creating murals at Rockefeller Center and Roseland at Times Square, he's designed a snowboard collection for Burton and created the cover for the official City Guide of New York.

But when he goes home, it's not to a SoHo loft or an Upper West Side pre-war apartment. It's to South Salem, where, for the past 11 years, the Christophers have lived in a 4,000-square-foot California-style home built in 1968 that they renovated, adding a studio over the garage and a fishpond with a small waterfall in the courtyard.

On a recent afternoon, he discussed some of his favorite possessions.

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mix and match

Look closely at this lamp and you'll see that it's made of matchsticks. And the tabletop it sits on? Matchsticks, too. Both were made in the 1940s by prisoners who, says Christopher, "smoked a lot and had nothing to do," so they glued matchsticks together like mosaics. The base of the lamp is in the shape of a cowboy boot with a spade on its side; it's decorated with other found objects, including Popsicle sticks and fragments of glass.



noh way

A gift from Tsugu Tamenaga, the owner of Christopher's Paris gallery, this cedar representation of a Japanese Noh theater actor is 150 years old. Perched on a wooden base, the statue is about a foot tall and comes in a box with a sliding lid. Says Christopher: "The smell of cedar fills the air" when opened.

box trot

The blanket chest, painted by a film scene artist for his son, was picked up a few years ago in Hollywood. "It has this cool 1950s look to it," Christopher says. "Everybody was named Mike back then. There were at least half a dozen Mikes in my classes as a kid.



wheel of fortune

Covered with old carnival paint, this gaming wheel from the Santa Cruz Boardwalk in California did plenty of hard service back in the 1920s and onward. Holes were drilled and filled with lead so the wheel would end up on an unpopular number, such as 13, when spun, resulting in many an

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unhappy gambler.

tattoo you

Sometime around 1940, this pair of sassy, shapely plywood brunettes hung outside a carnival tattoo tent to attract customers. Standing five feet tall, they're now mounted in the Christophers' living room. The girls are part of the artist's extensive collection of tattoo art, including framed designs by the likes of George Burchett, Sailor Jerry, and Dainty Doty. He owns more than 50 pieces, all of which, he assures, are on the wall and not on his body.



kustom kulture kollektible

Growing up in southern California, Christopher lusted after the designs of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, the artist and cartoonist who was one of the pioneers of the Kustom Kulture hotrod movement there. Today, one of Christopher's prized possessions is this drag-racing helmet from the early 1960s—signed by Roth and painted with his icon, Rat Fink—that he found last year at a flea market at Pasadena's Rose Bowl. "Rat Fink was this smelly fat rat with his eyeballs popping out," says Christopher. "He just stood there looking hideous. He was everything we wanted."



home sweet home

The young man who made this carved plaque labeled "Home" surely never would imagine its current place gracing the

current piece gracing the
Christophers' dining room. "It was
from a woodshop class in the
1960s," the artist says. "The
teacher probably told the kids to
do a carving of their home. But
this guy lived in a trailer, so that's
what he portrayed. You can see
how he altered the perspective to
show the front and side
simultaneously. I hope he got an
A."



seat of the moment

This chair from Santa Fe, handmade and pegged
together without nails, caught Christopher's eye
because he could imagine it sitting under a porch in
a desert ranch house or hotel veranda for the past
75 years. "It's getting harder to find furniture from
the Southwest that's not a bogus reproduction," he
says.

old sole

This Depression-era shoe-shine box features
lettering done by a professional sign painter. "It was
probably used in a train station, most likely by a guy
who knew what he was doing and how to get
noticed," speculates Christopher. "But what's with
the five- and ten-cent price? Did it depend upon
the customer's attire or the shine guy's mood?"



all in vane



Christopher traded a cowboy scene from the 1940s and some cash for this piece of Americana from the late 19th century: a verdigris pig weathervane, which is mounted above his home's kitchen doorway. While weathervanes traditionally feature figures that are elegant and proud, Christopher likes this one because, he says, "it's just such a grouchy, irritable pig."

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