

American Life Remembered: Kenton Nelson's Comfort Art

By Victoria Looseleaf

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He loves Fred Astaire, Walt Disney, and the noir fiction of Raymond Chandler. If that sounds a bit, well, trichotomous, it could also describe the art of R. Kenton Nelson, where the mundane is glorified, reality is heightened, and perfection can be downright disturbing.

Born and raised in Pasadena, the 58 year old with the boyish face spent 18 years as a graphic designer and illustrator before turning to oils on canvas. Indeed, Nelson has made some 900 paintings in the last two decades -- which works out to about one a week -- but who's counting? Self-taught as a painter, Nelson literally was born with the art gene; his great uncle was Mexican muralist Roberto Montenegro.

"Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were married in Roberto's back yard," says Nelson in his Pasadena studio, a woodsy cottage nestled on the grounds of the 100-year-old Morton Court complex. "And though my uncle died when I was in seventh grade, we grew up with works of Orozco, Siqueiros, and my uncle's in the house."

"That," adds Nelson, "obviously affected my work, because when I started out painting, I was primarily wanting to do murals. And most of my paintings are from that perspective: a worm's-eye view."

Nelson's works are also a world unto itself. A more upbeat combination of Edward Hopper, Grant Wood, and other American Scene painters, the genre -- narrative realism -- often evokes the good life in Southern California. Voluptuous bathing beauties in two-piece swimsuits can be seen diving, squirting ketchup on a hot dog, or taking a leisurely bicycle ride on the boardwalk -- albeit with various body parts out of frame. These gals have a lusciousness to them that not only shrouds the scene in mystery, but also beckons the viewer to fill in the guilty pleased blanks.



"Swim Party #3" by Kenton Nelson. | Image courtesy of the artist.

Bucolic family scenes might feature fluffy white clouds (clouds in Southern California -- another Nelson idealization) as a couple lounges on a redwood deck, their little boy about to let loose a model airplane into an azure sky. But women-centric tableaux -- one lost in thought as she hangs laundry on an outdoor clothesline, another climbing a ladder in heels and a tight skirt that

clings to her beautifully rounded derrière -- are a particular passion of Nelson's.



"The Ordinary Endeavor" by Kenton Nelson. | Image courtesy of the artist.

It's eroticism meets the Works Progress Administration: American life remembered, captured forever on canvas. A product of the advertising age with a Depression-era mentality (Nelson admits to owning a television set with rabbit ears), the artist says he jots down his continuously flowing ideas in a Moleskine sketchbook. He sleeps poorly because his mind is constantly churning.

"I'm rarely in here waiting for the muse," points out Nelson. "I'll come in at 7:30, start painting, and work all day, eating a Trader Joe's burrito at the easel. I'm a little boring that way."

Not exactly. He does, after all, play host to periodic all-male salons. That's when his studio becomes the Morton Court Gentleman's Supper Club, a man cave destination for artists, writers, musicians, and vintners who come together to "eat bad pizza and drink good alcohol."

And while Nelson scoffs at the notion of self-portraiture ("If I only had a different head and body, then it'd be great..."), men have a distinct presence in Kentonland. There they are, soldiers in the workaday world, if that world consisted of top hats and spit-polished black shoes, perfectly pressed, double-breasted blue suits, and ties (bow and otherwise).

Yet it's not all roses and lollipops -- think Fred Astaire dancing to Stravinsky. Underneath the surface, the beats are just a little bit off with these men (and women) of another time, another place; when movie theaters had uniformed ushers (and stadium seating referred to "ballparks"), when train travel was romantic, and chores were performed clad in shirtwaist dresses and pleated slacks. (Hello, "Ozzie and Harriett" -- if the couple were drinking double dirty martinis.)

For an autodidact, Nelson is an extraordinary draftsman; his paintings meticulously crafted. He begins by photographing a model (he's got what he calls a "morgue" file of countless pictures and images he likes), and then draws the subject before painting it in oil. Afterwards, he nimbly sands the surface, leaving absolutely no trace of brushstrokes in his quest for painterly perfection.

Part of that quest, says Nelson, comes by way of Southern California's light -- and the colors from 1950s and '60s movies.

"I'd come home from school, and mom would be watching 'Ben Hunter Movie Matinee.' I grew up loving the black and white movies. The lighting and

staging in those movies has everything to do with my painting. And then there was that really crazy Panavision or Technicolor, which was almost absurd. I don't think I'm not under the effects of that stuff."

Nelson's mother was a homemaker, and his father, who worked for General Motors for 35 years, was a fan of swing music. "So I grew up hearing all of that. And that's what I'm doing in my paintings -- trying to paint my perfect world, or my idea of the way I'd like to see the world... or paint a place I'd rather be."



"Father's Chores" by Kenton Nelson. | Image courtesy of the artist.

Nelson's current exhibition, mostly watercolors, is at [Peter Mendenhall Gallery](#) (through July 13), his fourth with the gallerist. Mendenhall has known

Nelson since his brother, Ted Mendenhall, gave the artist his first exhibition some 15 years ago.

"The core technique was there back then," explains Mendenhall, "but Kenton's painting has been refined. He says he becomes a better painter with each show. That may or may not be true. I think he becomes a slightly different painter, and I think those fundamental themes, related to this culture and to human nature -- he's just playing them out." And while people often talk about nostalgia in relation to Nelson's work, Mendenhall doesn't believe that the artist himself is nostalgic. "I think he's a smart enough painter to know that the good old days never really did exist. They could have, they might have, maybe they did, but you're not really sure, so they are acts of imagination, really. But they do look back."

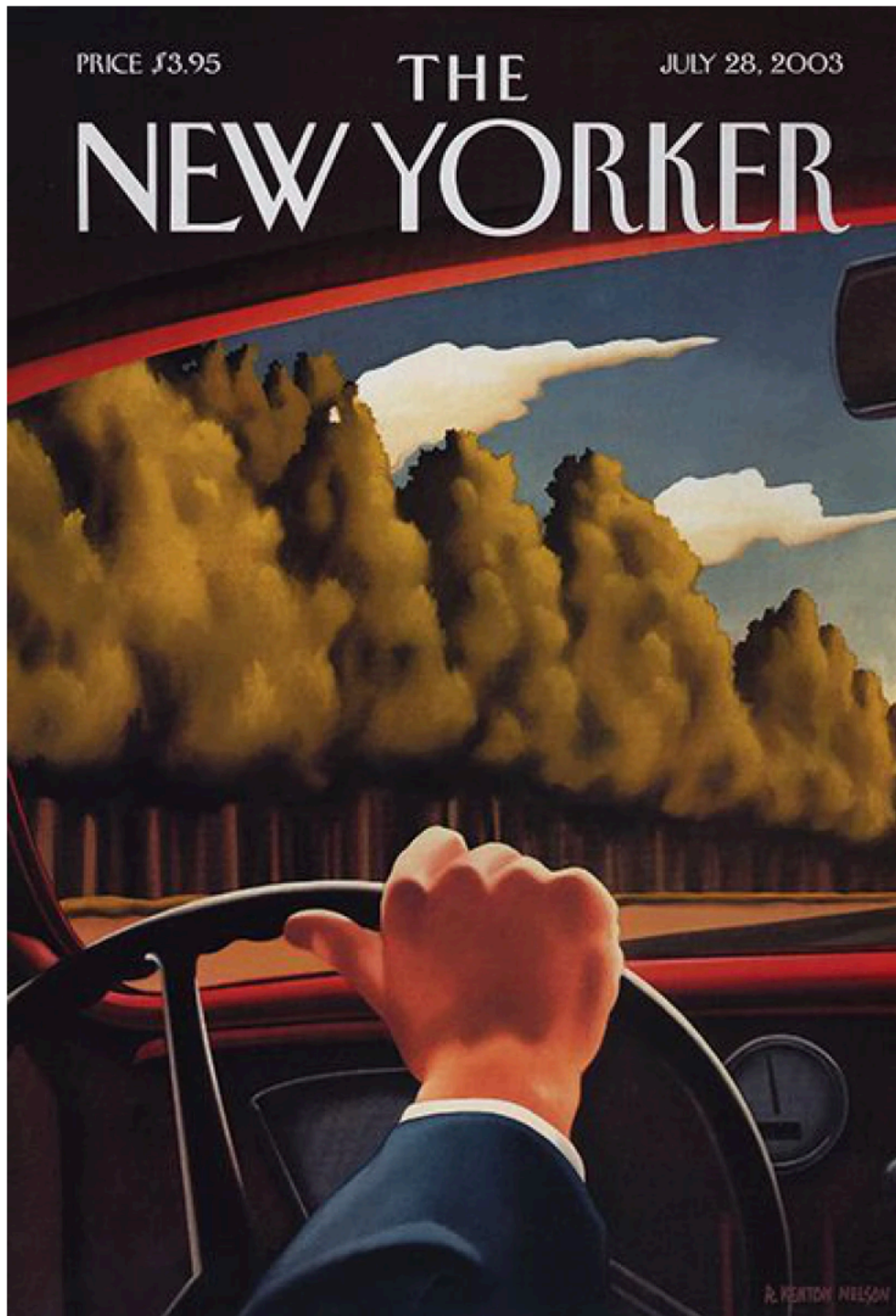
It does seem that a lot of people like looking back with Kenton Nelson. His works are in museums and are collected by Hollywood luminaries, including Steve Martin and Diane Keaton. His paintings have also been featured in movies, such as "Something's Gotta Give." Best-selling author Dean Koontz collects Nelson, as well.

In fact, Koontz wrote an introduction to Nelson's book, "Rhyme and Reason," published in 2005, whose series of paintings are based on nursery rhymes and run the gamut, from a woman holding a pie to a farmer tossing apple seeds onto the ground.

Koontz writes: "While a recognition of misfortune, fate, and even evil informs these paintings, they primarily express a joyful spirit and invite us to be delighted. Yes, death is at the periphery, and treachery, and sadness, but we are asked by the artist to focus on the still point of the turning world, where there is brightness and beauty, and not least of all hope."

This is Nelson as eternal optimist, despite his finding inspiration in the darker short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver and John Cheever. "I have no idea where I got that optimism from," confesses Nelson, "except if you work for yourself, you have to be an optimist. Because if you don't work, you don't eat."

Nelson is eating quite well these days, Trader Joe's burritos aside. The New Yorker has used five of his images for covers, including one with a "Mad Men" sensibility that features a disembodied hand clasping a steering wheel.



The New Yorker cover, 2003, Kenton Nelson. | Image courtesy of the artist.

He's also popular in Europe, where he's had a number of exhibitions in Switzerland and Austria (and is in Vienna's Albertina Contemporary Museum), while German urbanites seem particularly fixated on Nelson's vision. Mendenhall says that Nelson's paintings "satisfy either a curiosity or a

certainty that a lot of Germans have about this country, that it must play into their expectations about America and the American way of life."

Whatever it is, Kenton Nelson is riding a wave, one where even an ordinary object -- a thermos, for example -- becomes a symbol of fascination, one to be coveted.

"I drew a thermos five or six years ago," explains Nelson, "and for this watercolor show, at the last hour I decided to paint a thermos. Peter said I could have sold that thing 15 times, which surprised me. It's a thermos, for crying out loud. The only thing I can think is, it's kind of American comfort -- comfort art."



"Red Cap" by Kenton Nelson. | Image courtesy of the artist.