

Pasadena painter Kenton Nelson wraps nostalgia with surrealism, precision with mystery

Kevin Ferguson | [Off-Ramp®](#) | March 9, 2012

Painter Kenton Nelson's work can be seen in galleries and homes all over the world, in museums as far as Austria and on five New Yorker covers. He paints brilliant, strange scenes of ordinary California life with a meticulous attention to detail, and he lives right here in Pasadena. Off-Ramp producer Kevin Ferguson met up with Nelson at his studio.



Artist Kenton Nelson in his Pasadena studio [KEVIN FERGUSON/KPCC](#)

Nelson has wanted to be an artist for as long as he can remember.

"My great-uncle was a muralist, a Mexican muralist. His name was Roberto Montenegro. My first name is Robert; I was named after him," he said. "I grew up hearing stories of his murals and getting to see them. We grew up with his friend's artwork and his artwork in the house, and so I wanted to be an artist growing up."

After pursuing a short career as a musician, he worked as a graphic designer and illustrator for 18 years. Then, in the early '90s, he decided to try and live out his childhood dream.

"I had always wanted to learn how to paint, I had never taken painting, so I went and bought some paints. I've been painting ever since," he explained.

Nelson was heavily influenced by American scene painters like [Edward Hopper](#), a pre-war American artist. "I loved that they took a European medium and turned it their own," he added.

Brushstrokes are invisible in Nelson's works. According to Nelson, that's because he was looking at smaller-sized photos of Hopper's paintings in books as he first learned to paint.

"That really influenced how I worked, well, not until I saw his show at the Whitney back in the '90s that I realized his work is very expressive and had a lot of paint strokes in it. By that time the damage had been done, and I had my style," he joked.

During our visit to Nelson's studio, he described a painting of a woman gardening. His paintings are nostalgic for the 1950s - his childhood.

"I grew up in the '50s, an ideal time. I'd get up and my mom's watching all the movies on the TV from the '30s. I had an appreciation for that era, and I loved the period of time that I grew in—the promise of the future," he recalled.

The woman depicted works with a flower pot, dressed more formally than necessary for the task at hand. According to Nelson, she was inspired by his grandfather.

"My grandfather gardened in a necktie," he said. "I'd go over there and he'd be in his white shirt, sleeves rolled up, and so I did this. And always, the people are dressed more from my youth. More from the 1950s. To me, I guess it's the charitable deceptions and nostalgia where I'm thinking back about how perfect everything was and all of that."

What most can't tell from seeing the painting is that it's a piece about infertility.

"I always have a subtext to the paintings. No one needs to know, or no one will ever hear the story about, but this is how I started painting. I think of something, a scene I'd like to see, and that's it," he laughed.

Often, his paintings are open to many interpretations. In his piece, ["Curiosity,"](#) a woman is hunched over on the floor, looking towards the viewer. It's ambiguous whether she's listening to someone on the floor

below, or looking under a bed for something. Nelson said he likes leaving it up to the viewer. He also does this by [painting only parts of a person](#).

"I started doing that based on bad photographs, and bad photos that people would take of their family. And I loved the cropping of those. And also I found, over doing it for several years and all that, that it really leaves for an open ended narrative. If I crop somebody below their nose, than that person becomes every man," he noted.

Nelson said the most important aspect of his paintings is that they each tell a story.

"Before I even picked up a paintbrush and learned how, I was reading a lot of short stories by Fitzgerald and John Cheever," he said. "I loved that these guys could take me away from wherever I was, and I'd get completely lost in this five- or ten-page story, and I literally wrote in my journal before I started painting that if I could do that with a painting, maybe my job was done."



Six P.M., oil and canvas, 2010 [KENTON NELSON](#)



Service and Food, oil on canvas, 2008 [KENTON NELSON](#)



Bridge, oil on canvas, 2011 [KENTON NELSON](#)