

## Introduction

32 Faces

by

Bob Hicks

Sculptor Lee Kelly, sitting like a craggy farmer amid the spools and vises of his machine shop.

The young drawing and printmaking artist Samantha Wall, pencil in hand, bent intently and precisely over her work desk.

Printmaker Tom Prochaska, hair bristling like an absent-minded experiment in static electricity, framed by the gears and wheel of his press.

Sculptor M.J. Anderson, surrounded on the steps of her Nehalem studio by a worn broom, a giant dustpan, stacks of buckets, and heavy-duty hooks and chains.

Ceramic and steel artist J.D. Perkin, standing amid a welter of hoses and hand tools and a big rustic kiln, torsos and body parts and a big striped head lined neatly on shelves.

Painter Laura Ross-Paul, straight and sturdy, balanced between brawny paintings taller than she is.

Walk with photographer K.B. Dixon into the studios and homes of the thirty-two Oregon artists in *Face to Face* and it's as if you are walking into industrial zones. Which, of course, you are. These are working spaces and working faces.

Looking at the portraits and studio shots in Dixon's selection of photographs, I think of muscle and work and energy in repose just itching to get back at it. Dixon's photographs aren't tidy images of finished artwork lining pristine gallery walls. They are backstage documents of the process itself, of the zone where ideas and industry merge and creation begins. Making art is hard physical work, an intense undertaking that involves the brain and hand and sinew and bone. Seeing these practitioners in these settings is like seeing dancers in the studio or athletes in the weight room.

Like the work of most good portrait artists, Dixon's photographs perch somewhere between self-aware surfaces and excursions in depth. They're collaborations, partnerships between subject and artist. The subjects know they're being photographed and pose for the camera, but also leave themselves open to the subtleties and secrets of what the camera finds. The results can be startlingly varied, from Sally Cleveland's anxious gaze, to Jack Portland's rumped-Yoda reflectiveness, to Sherrie Wolf's hands-on-hips declaration of independence, to the elder cool of Mel Katz leaning back, smiling quizzically, cigarette propped jauntily in hand.

Dixon's choice of thirty-two artists is compact and selective. They are artists whose work he has followed and admired, sometimes for decades, and they include a lot of elder statesmen and mid-career artists with a sprinkle of fresh younger faces. They form a community, an artisanal alliance, a guild of sorts. Working as an artist is a lonely or at least a solitary pursuit, and yet most of these artists know one another or know one another's work and are linked by interest, experience, outlook, and the tools of the trade.

It's fitting that the first artist in *Face to Face* is the veteran painter and printmaker George Johanson who undertook a similar project with his 2001 book of drawings *Equivalents: Portraits of 80 Oregon Artists*. Many of the same artists are represented in both books. The Dutch-born Portland painter Henk Pander, shown in the welter of his studio with the props for a giant apocalyptic painting of skeleton beasts and riders, was the impetus for an even earlier project in art as community, the Visual Chronicle of Portland, a publicly owned collection begun in the mid-1980s and patterned after a similar "artistic atlas" in Amsterdam.

All of the photographs in *Face to Face* are black and white, lending a kind of formal timelessness to Dixon's project. It's an interesting decision because so many of the artists he has chosen work in vivid colors. By shooting in black and white he emphasizes form and structure – essential elements to any artist – and is able to explore the surprising complexities inherent in simplicity. Subtract one element, intensify the rest.

The format also allows for an intriguing inversion. In addition to being a photographer, Dixon is a novelist and short-story writer, and a good one, and his books are minimalist with a telltale dry humor. His 2012 novel *The Photo Album*, for instance, which won the Eric Hoffer Award, is a faux-memoir told in a collection of photographs – except all the photos are blank frames accompanied by brief explanations of what the reader can't see. "Plate 96" is described in part: "This is a photo I took of Ryan Richardson giving an interview – a thing he does not like to do, is terrible at, and avoids whenever he can. His discomfort is palpable." Whether some of his subjects were uncomfortable in front of his camera, what Dixon achieves in *Face to Face* is a flip side to *The Photo Album*: all photos, few words.

The community of artists that Dixon chooses is as interesting for its variety as its similarities and sometimes also for its subtle connections. The painter Melinda Thorsnes, known for her vivid and sometimes unnerving portrayals of the eccentricities of the everyday, leans tall and elegant against the jamb of a door that is decorated with a carving of skulls and crossbones. Rick Bartow, celebrated for his drawings, carvings, and paintings of animal and human transformations, sits at home in South Beach on the Oregon Coast wearing a shirt decorated with resplendently stitched skulls and roses. A ventriloquist's dummy sits atop a table in Prochaska's studio. A toy horse and a dollhouse perch on a shelf in Matthew Dennison's studio. Veteran painters Mary Josephson and Gregory Grenon, who are married, stand amid similarly crowded, mirror-image studio spaces that are separated by a hallway. Painter and teacher Paul Missal, looking like a more intellectual Burl Ives, stares back at himself from inside the frame of a mirror.

Dixon's photographs can throw fascinating reflections on the work his artists create. The pristine clarity of Wall's desk and appearance with the hint of something untamed lurking. The clean outline of Rene Rickabaugh's cropped beard and hair detailed like his exquisite mosaic-like miniatures. Tom Cramer, broad and sturdy as a football player, standing in his kitchen where he has painted the ceiling in the broad pop-art patterns of his well-known decorated cars. The camera captures the vagabond dreaminess of Stephen O'Donnell known for his androgynous self-portraits and richly baroque style. A similarly elusive softness, the in-and-outness of an abstracted dream, touches the

features of the painter Katherine Ace whose most recent work explores the mysteries and meanings of myths and fairy tales.

One thing I like about these photographs of the artists, their work spaces, and usually at least one finished piece of art is that they're interesting not just as documents, but as images in their own right. They're well-framed and well-structured and, more importantly, they feed the curiosity about human beings that is at the core of portrait art. You don't need to know anything about these artists' work to find their portraits fascinating, although of course the more you know, the richer the images become.

Dixon's photographs offer hints of human stories, observations, and suggestions of tales not fully told. Who is this Clint Brown, the Corvallis painter, who looks in one portrait like a bohemian Indiana Jones and in another, standing in front of a painting of grappling nudes, like a wryly distinguished professor emeritus (which he happens to be)? What about those fascinating photographs of painter and animator Mark Andres, all white-bearded and tousled, sitting reflectively before a woodstove with a Matisse-like figurine in one image and glancing downward with a parrot perched on his shoulder in another?

There is, of course, a multiplicity of styles and approaches to art among the artists of Oregon and the Northwest from the most literal and historically rooted to the most ephemeral and conceptual: In a world as interconnected and varied as the twenty-first century's, it's probably foolhardy to try to define a regional style at all. But if anything besides geography binds these thirty-two artists together, it might be the physicality of their work, the importance of matter. In other words, geography itself.

For even the most abstract of these artists, a kind of earthiness abides. Michael Knutson's deeply patterned and richly textured paintings have a distinctly physical presence. The bold geometric abstracts of Lucinda Parker (who looks a bit in this portrait like that other grand figure of Oregon arts and letters, the novelist and poet Ursula K. Le Guin) are like rough-carved territories of movement and thought.

Others are more immediately attached to evocations of place. Cleveland paints unglamorized urban scenes often seeking out forgotten, utilitarian, or industrial spaces. So does Roll Hardy, who balances big tough urban paintings with his work on much smaller and more malleable surfaces as a tattoo artist. Jackie Johnson's vibrantly stylized cityscapes ripple with physicality. Christopher Rauschenberg, the lone photographer among the thirty-two, travels the world in search of built environments. Steven Hayes has established his career on carefully observed landscapes. Michael Brophy built his reputation on images of the used and abandoned environment, the relationship between humans and land. Dennison's paintings often depict animals imperiled by human incursion. Robert Dozono, shown in two splendid environmental images, makes art from detritus – garbage – that he collects from all around him. Wolf floats lush fruits and flowers in front of art-historical scenes. Johanson created images of a geologically transformed city after Mount St. Helens blew its stack.

Dixon's group of talented artists isn't ironic or sensational or celebrity-driven, and although a few are known nationally or internationally, the fame game isn't one they play.

As a group there is something blue-collar about them: they roll up their sleeves, get dirty, and get down to it. Working artists, working at art.

And Dixon, working his camera, meets them face to face.