

<http://www.johansennewman.com/aboutme.html>

Johansen Newman ILLUSTRATOR

"Every artist dips his brush into his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures."---
Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit, 1887

"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be."

-Douglas Adams

*"Art isn't about validating yourself, as much as recognizing yourself."---*me.



Barbara Johansen Newman

I am an illustrator. I've been illustrating professionally for more than 20 years. I've done art for books, art for magazines and newspaper articles, art for calendars and advertising, greeting cards, corporate reports, medical reports, invitations, and even other assignments for things I probably can't remember. For the ten years before I was an illustrator, I worked with puppets and created figurative fiber sculptures which I exhibited at shows and galleries around the country.

If you want to jump ahead to the cold hard facts, and see my [Illustration Client List](#), click to follow that link. If you want to check out my Puppeteer and Fiber Artist shows and awards, you can check back at this site to see if I've found time to post that history, or [email me](#) and ask.

I live in Massachusetts with my husband Phil, and three sons, Dave, Mike, and Ben.

How I Got Here

What follows is a little background information that I hope will speak to kids who love being creative. It is my hope that young artists seek fulfillment and inspiration in EVERY aspect of their artistic journeys, which are not always the most direct paths when all is said and done. I also want to share with more experienced artists in appreciating the "long, strange trip" of spending one's life making art.

Thanks to Mom and Old Walls

Like almost all artists, I began my “career” when I was still a kid. My mother really did encourage me to draw on my bedroom walls when I was very little--honest to goodness. And my parents both aspired to be artists themselves since they went to art high school, so from the time I could talk about it, I talked about growing up to be an artist. All my grandparents were also artistic. They drew, they painted, they sewed, and they sang and made music.

Unfortunately, I never made music and I can't sing worth a cent, but I have always drawn, and painted, and even sewn. And I have always taken the creative urge for granted, because I was surrounded by it. I am thankful to my extended family for making sure that creativity was celebrated and encouraged. And I am very thankful that they also made sure that there were old rolls of shelf paper hanging around so I had plenty of cheap paper to draw on. Because after a while the walls leave something to be desired.

The Continental Divide

In a nutshell, I cannot ever remember not drawing and painting while growing up, but, at some point in high school, I had that moment of truth when I realized that “I am an artist”, that's the way it was, and Math was NOT going to be my major in college. That moment came especially to me in Trigonometry class. But, more importantly, it came to me when I looked the Demon-of-College-Prep (also known as the “guidance counselor”) in the face and said, “No way am I going to take chemistry my Junior Year! I'm takin' art.”

For some reason at the age of about 16 -- for a reason I can't even remember now--I had this crazy vision that I had to make “art” my life's devotion, and I had to take whatever steps I needed to take to make it happen. That was the first kind-of serious, kind-of risky step I ever took to follow my heart, because everyone took the same college prep courses back then, and everyone thought I was out of my mind.

In spite of the peer pressure and raised eyebrows, I took art and I never looked back. And I made plans to go to art school. But where? I probably would have gone right to professional school in NY, and skipped things like Sociology 101 and Psychology 101, but my mother made me promise to get a degree in education so I could teach. That meant going to a regular university and taking those very courses and courses like them. The same mother that encouraged me to draw on my walls was also convinced that if I tried to support myself as an artist I would end up starving and “living in a cold water flat”. I did not know what a “cold water flat” was, but I knew that my mother did not want me to live in one. So I made sure to get a B.F.A. with certification in Art Education. And then, of course, I never looked for a teaching job.

Partners

Before I finished college, I married my wonderful, pro-art, best friend, childhood sweetheart, Phil. We were young, and carefree, and we didn't know what we were going to do for certain in our life together, except that I was going to make art and he was going to help to keep us from ending up in that old cold water flat. All our flats were old, but they definitely had hot water.

As it turns out, we were both involved in art for a spell when we finished school. During

college I had spent some time studying puppetry at the Bil Baird Theater in New York City and I developed a love of the art of puppets. I got Phil interested in puppets as well, so he built us a traveling puppet stage, we made puppets, we wrote a few plays, and before long we were hired to perform with our troop, The Moonberry Puppets, in and around the Buffalo area. We also connected with the late Janet MacDonald, who was a well known puppeteer in the Buffalo area for many years. She inspired us and was very helpful.

To tell the truth, Phil was (and still is!) a much better puppeteer than I. He was a talented performer and he could just lose himself in the puppet characters. I mostly lost myself in the puppet creation, which is to say that I liked making the puppets even more than I liked performing with them.

One Thing Led to Another

The turning point for Moonberry Puppets and my art career came when we were hired to do a puppet show at a local craft fair. As part of our payment I got a booth to sell hand made puppets. From that show we were invited to other shows and I was invited to other craft fairs as an exhibitor.

In Upstate NY in the seventies, there was a wonderful culture of fine handcrafts . Because of wonderful, rich craft programs at colleges in Rochester and Buffalo, many of the country's best and most talented craftsmen seemed to live in the area. Having the good fortune to reside in that area, in that atmosphere, at that time, made me want to go far away from traditional media for artistic expression. Between my exposure to crafts and my love of puppetry, the law of serendipity (is that an oxymoron?) put me in a wonderful new mindset that embraced the possibilities of something besides paint and paper. I fell into a love affair with fabric and textiles, and it was wonderful to get lost in a medium that came into my lap almost by accident.

Juried craft fairs full of wonderful handmade objects were flourishing and the public began to gain some sophistication in looking at fine crafts in a serious way. In a relatively short time for me, the puppets became dolls, and I was spending more time making and selling the figures than I was doing puppet shows. Before long we had left the puppets behind, and I was exhibiting in shows like Kenan Center's "100 American Craftsmen" and the American Craft Council show at Rhinebeck, NY. Doing those shows led to many other shows, sales, and gallery exhibits.

The technique that I ended up using to create all my figures was called "needle modeling", which is using a needle and thread to "sculpt" cloth into a face and keep it that way. Sometimes this is done using nylon stockings. I chose to use Cotton stockingette. Except for large seams, all of my work was done by hand.

The first figures I created were fashioned from old clothing in somber colors. The characters were mostly older, and they were portraits of people who had seen and done much, and were a little the worse for wear. Buffalo, being in a bit of a depression at the time , had many

people who fit that description. Inspiration was all around me in that city.



It was a wonderful, funky place to live, even if a little depressing because of all the gray days. The sun rarely made appearances there all winter long, and my work was appropriately gray and brooding. Unemployment was very high in western NY State back then, and even though Phil kept us afloat by working at a rather tedious office job, we lived pretty much hand-to-mouth. I expressed a general bleakness in my dolls that was in the air at that time. My work grew quite dark and cloistered.

Because of the mood of my work, I was a frequent buyer at the local Goodwill's and the Salvation Army to find the right tweeds, prints, and textures from old clothes to use for the figures. (All that time I spent at Goodwill and the Salvation Army Thrift Store also presented a hazard to our financial health, since I then embarked on my lifelong journey of collecting various and sundry junk and antiques-- but that is another story.)

The creation of these soft people was something I did in a little bedroom studio in a dark apartment on the north side of Buffalo. I spent morning, afternoon, and evening creating faces, combing fabrics, painting eyeballs, and adding small details that would bring these characters to life. I found that it was the small touches that lent authenticity to the characters I was trying to create. For a spell I even did a series of street people and bag ladies. I wrote tiny stories or vignettes about each character. In essence the dolls were an extension of the puppets, but without actual performance. The performance was to be imagined in the head of the person who bought them.

During the years I made the puppets and soft figures I was lucky to receive a lot of positive attention. I won awards, and had lots of support through newspaper reviews, write-ups and sales to the public. Gallery owners all over the country asked me to exhibit in shows. One southern museum even bought a piece. And I participated and won "Best of Show" in a juried exhibit sponsored by Cotton Incorporated that traveled all over the US. It was a good time for making that kind of art and my ego was stroked all the time. And anyone who has ever gone to a university or college to study art knows that after four years of art professors, most artists can use a little ego stroking.



Flying Away Through the Cracks in the Clouds

Leaving Buffalo changed the style of my work. When we moved away, the sun began to shine, our spirits lifted, color started to appear on my dolls, and I felt less of a need to develop character as much as just play with cloth, paint, threads, texture and brighter hues. And that is the trend I continued with. I ended up dyeing all my own fabric and painting all the patterns myself. I used a lot of textile surface embellishment with threads and fabric techniques like quilting and trapunto. By the time I was close to no longer making the figures at all, I found myself working in bright, hot pink, turquoise, and rich reds. I was painting all my own fabrics and using patterns and wild stencils. Gesture and color was my focus. Surface decoration was key. The figures flattened out and took on the effect of drawings.

At the time I was choosing to wrap up my career as a fiber artist, shortly after we moved to Boston, one of my students and friends was **Pacita Abad**, whom I taught the skill and art of painting on fabric and then stuffing and quilting for added dimension. She was especially interested in the trapunto technique which I employed quite a bit in my figures and wall hangings. She went on to take her lovely primitive style paintings of life in the Philippines and blow them up to create large scale quilts using the methods I showed her. It was a fun time in my life when **Pacita**, and two other friends and I got together weekly to just paint and discuss art.

I guess it was very natural that I then made the transition to working in two dimensions, since I was painting more and more on the dolls. And since the dolls themselves were very narrative, it made perfect sense that illustration was what I really wanted to do more than anything else.

Back to Two Dimensions But It Was Still the Same Cast of Characters

Since becoming an illustrator meant putting together a portfolio of art, and pounding the pavement, I eased myself out of doll making and fiber arts, and focused entirely on drawing and painting. My goal was getting work as an illustrator.

As it turned out, the kind of stuff I started drawing and painting was pretty much the same characters I had created as puppets and dolls. And I tended to use paint and other media in the same way I used dyes, fabrics and threads. It was just that it ended up on paper.

I took about six months to just sit and paint and have enough pieces to take around looking

for artwork. I started to go around and show it all to art directors and art editors. I made phone calls. I walked all over town with my portfolio. I made a trip to NY. The kids' publishers told me my work was very good for editorial publishing. The editorial art directors told me my work was perfect for kids' books. Ultimately, my first work was in magazines and newspapers, because the art was a touch on the edgy side.

And that is how I became an illustrator.

Thank you to the late Stan McCray at Boston Magazine for giving me my first real assignments and seeing the potential in my work. In that forum, and at the now defunct Ultrasport, I really developed into an illustrator.

I ended up doing a lot of work for many magazines and newspapers all over the US.

Over the years, and after becoming a Mom, my work grew less edgy with fewer dark characters. I started going in the direction of children's books more, since I was reading a lot of them and enjoying myself very much doing it. Now, that is mostly what I do, because I love books more than anything. And now I write about the characters again, in addition to just making them.

Hey! I Know You!

It was very helpful to put this history into words. I guess I never thought about how consistent my aesthetic sensibility is. I couldn't change what I like to do if I tried. The puppets are very much present in the stories I illustrate now. And the characters I draw now, lived and breathed as small performers up on our puppet stage of old, or they sat around at Rhinebeck and watched 50,000 fair visitors stroll by.

I have even begun to paint on canvas again--something I haven't done since college. Naturally I just paint the people who were puppets, dolls, and book characters. Doesn't matter if it's behind a miniature curtain, stuffed with cotton, or on paper or canvas. Everybody is there. The men and women of Buffalo and other similar characters from before and after--then and now.

Oh, and remember that nasty habit I mentioned? You know, the habit of scouring the thrift shops and antiques center for priceless junk? I still do it. I can even do it twenty-four hours a day, thanks to eBay. Of course the good part is that I can afford it more now. But the better part is that I live surrounded by it and it --the junk--shows up in my art work all the time right alongside everything else.

So in the end, it's all the same: Same people, same world, same priceless junk and details. That's who I am and that's my story and I'm stickin' to it.

And if you want to enjoy being an artist, discover what your story is and live it through your art.

O.K., now once more with feeling:

"Every artist dips his brush into his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures."

"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to

be."

"Art isn't about validating yourself, as much as recognizing yourself."

Nuff said. Now go make your art.