

FINE ART

Artist Jonas Gerard, at Rest

It's 2 a.m. and a light shines in the studio of Asheville artist Jonas Gerard.

Painting, still painting, always painting, keep painting.

He is up most nights, painting.

On a good night, he will produce three.

Painting, still painting, always painting, keep painting.

From the day he received his first set of paints at 8 years old, he's been painting.

Painting, still painting, always painting, keep painting.

Stop.

I found Jonas Gerard on a rare day of rest. His studio, quiet. His paints unopened. His brushes, still. He was waiting for me, walking about his studio. Later that day, he was to go to Charlotte, North Carolina, to exhibit in another show. It was a day to relax.

When I told Gerard I'd never been to his gallery, he gave me a wide-eyed look of surprise and, smiling, proudly showed me around the place.

People seem to be as important to the Moroccan-born artist as his paintings. Our first stop was to meet his staff - five people who seem more like family than employees. The atmosphere is convivial, inviting. It feels like I'm visiting a friend.

To Gerard, his gallery, located

in Asheville's River Arts District, is much like home - he spends most of his waking hours there, although his place of residence is a mere stone's throw away.

This arrangement makes sense, according to life partner Linda Greenup, because "he lives to paint." In fact, "he needs to paint," she said. The two met several years ago at an art show in Virginia Beach. Greenup, also an accomplished artist, has space at Gerard's gallery for her own paintings and photography, but spends much of her time as the his non-profit company's director.

Since moving to Asheville last May from Miami Beach, Florida, Gerard, who has appeared on ABC-TV's 20/20 program and whose work is on exhibition throughout the United States and abroad, has made an impact on the local art scene with his unique brand of abstract expressionism, his open, charismatic personality and his flamboyant style of performance painting in which he dances to high-spirited music while painting.



Artist Jonas Gerard

As we walked around his 5,000-foot studio/gallery, I could see firsthand how the style and focus of his work has changed throughout the years - from landscapes to portraits to the brightly-colored abstracts he's been doing for nearly two decades. A painting he did as an 11-year-old child (with a re-do on the back demanded, at the time, by his exacting mother) hangs a few steps away from a copy of his famous Bicentennial portrait, which was accepted by President Ford into the White House in 1975 and currently is housed in the Smithsonian Institute's permanent collection.

The intensity of color, contrast and movement make the paintings, which are done mostly in acrylics, seem to jump off the canvases.

He spoke of his paintings as if they were living beings, explaining that one painting "wanted to be structured" and that each "starts out bad until the good is allowed to come through.

"Creative energy is a spiritual thing

BY PAM J. HECHT

- it happens at will, without thought," he said. "It's all in the self-knowing and the knowledge that everything happens for a reason."

He pointed to another painting, describing the evolution of its seemingly random shapes and lines and when I asked him if a child could do it, he answered, without hesitation, "Yes, absolutely yes.

"The difference is in the technical knowledge, years of experience, and available materials," he explained. The key, he said, is to "quiet the mind" and to paint with the wild abandon of a child, without caring about the work."

He acknowledged that a keen sense of color and composition is also required, but pointed out that the most important part is "to enjoy and trust the process and to let go."

Gerard has been exhibiting since the age of 16, regularly selling paintings on the street, but said he was rejected from every art school he applied to and was advised to pursue another field. He kept painting.

He is regularly described as generous in spirit, welcoming fledgling artists into his studio and contributing to organizations such as the Asheville Arts Council, whenever possible.

But mostly, Jonas Gerard is full of stories, so many stories. He likes to tell them and I listen to each one, mesmerized. His strangely soothing voice sounds like a French Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*.

He tried this, he went there, he did that. He was lost in drugs, lost at war, lost in meditation. But always, he was painting, still painting, happily painting...

Visit Jonas Gerard at his gallery for a birthday party with cake, art, music and fun, June 13, 5 - 7 p.m. Performance paintings on June 14 & 15 at 2 p.m., as part of the River Arts District Studio Stroll. Winner of painting announced, June 15, 4 p.m.

If you go

Jonas Gerard Fine Art, 240 Clingman Avenue, in Asheville.

Gallery hours: Monday - Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 1-6 p.m.

(828) 350-7711, www.jonasgerard.com