

Child's play for painter

Illustrator finds fun, even amid tragedy

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Fred Calleri's "Fun with Son," courtesy of Gallery MAR.

• Old Town hasn't yet taken on the mud-luscious, puddle-wonderful form of warmer weather, but Fred Calleri's collection of oil paintings on display at Gallery MAR is enough to give even avid skiers and snowboarders a little spring fever.

The kids in "Shorty's Chair," "Fun with Son" and "World Away" are inwardly glowing with large eyes, ruddy noses, long necks and pursed lips. The playfully distorted figures are a far cry from the realism Calleri practiced until one night in 2005. "I decided to distort," he said declaratively. "I spread the eyes and stretched the necks."

Almost immediately, patrons started lining up for portraits. The oil paintings are uplifting, adorable and expressive. He bases some of his pieces on historical photographs. They are a portrait of a childhood he never had. "Why I paint what I paint is for a good, warm, safe kind of feeling," he said. "People look at my paintings and feel good."

Calleri's life has been more complicated than that. Born and raised in Baltimore, Calleri described himself as a talented young artist, but his pragmatic dad encouraged a more stable career in the Army.

Calleri enlisted after high school and for two years served at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. He hated the military and did what he could to avoid war games and long, dreary training exercises. Painting was subterfuge.

For the last six months of his tenure, Calleri served as the battalion artist and tried his hand at cartography. He painted army patches, charts, maps and graphs. Artistically, the experience was bankrupt, but he did learn valuable life lessons. "Get your act together, or you'll end up with these people for the rest of your life," he quipped.

After leaving the military, Calleri attended the Maryland Institute of Art. His start was not auspicious. He disliked his first painting class and the noxious smell of oil paint made him sick. Graphic design held more promise. He started with water-based paint and sketched over the images with ink and pencil.

Upon graduating, Calleri took a job with a marketing firm, but spent his evenings painting. In the mid-90's, his life took a tragic turn. A gunshot wound left his sister in a wheelchair and, years later, he developed a taste for drugs. His sister ultimately pulled him through hard times. Calleri explains it in terms of his craft. "I paint with my right hand," he said. "My sister taught me that if I had my right hand chopped off, I would still be OK and go on living."

The desire to break bad habits and live closer to his son swept Calleri to the West. He moved from Maryland to Flagstaff, Ariz., in 2001. A history buff, Calleri's work took on a western bent. He tagged along with cowboys, photographed cattle drives and attended American Indian reenactments. He shrugged off the motif when he saw that a plethora of other painters were doing similar work, and instead found solace, and success, in distortion.

Today, he eschews violence in his work, preferring magical realism the shades of darkness that muddied his own life.