

The Eye of an Artist

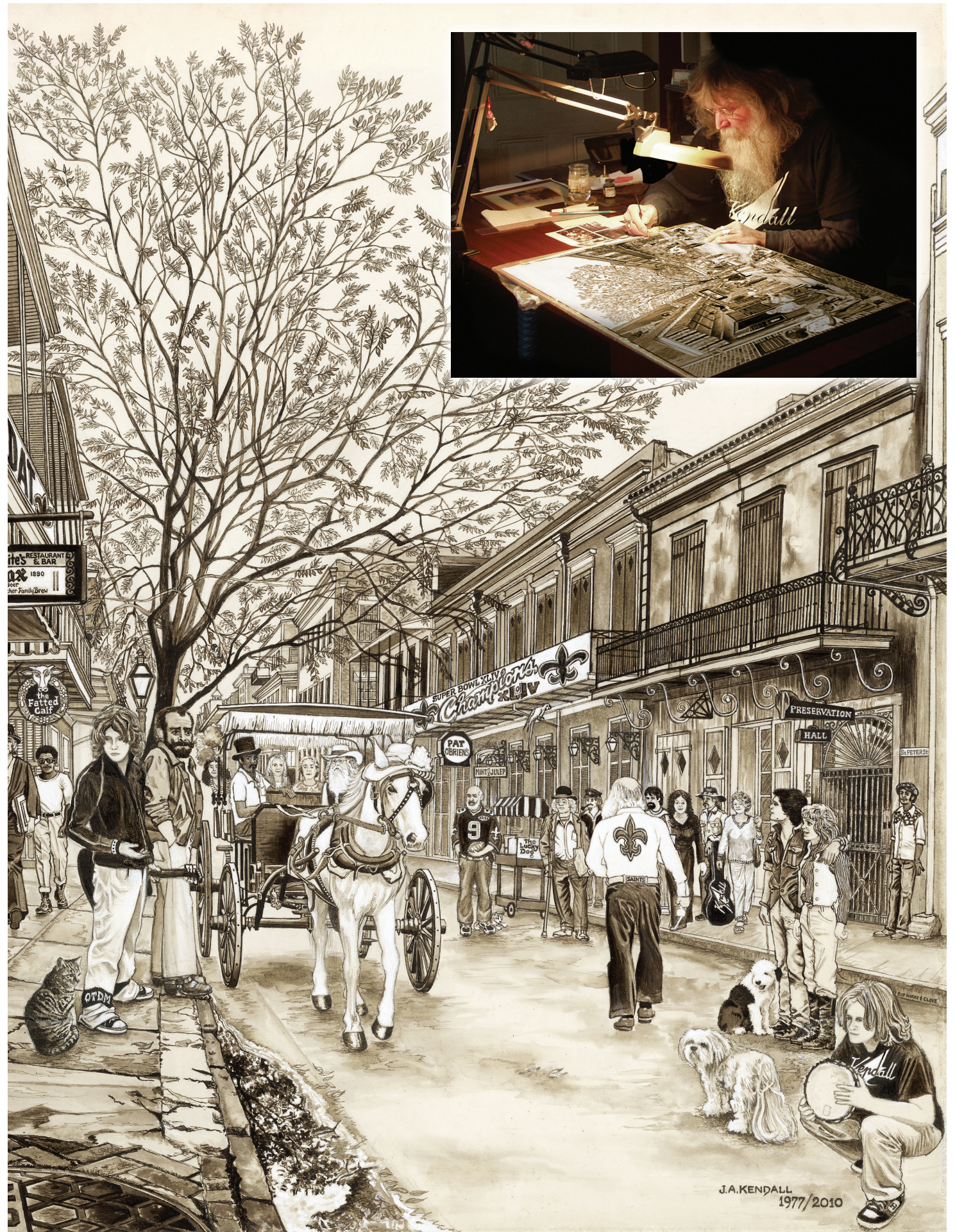
BY John Walters

You could understand if John Kendall were angry, upset, embittered. His art is painstakingly realistic; he carefully renders every bit of detail in a scene. It's close, demanding work, and a keen eye is essential.

But for almost 30 years, Kendall has had serious eye trouble. He's been through seven major surgeries, with more likely on the way. At best, he works much more slowly than he otherwise would. At times he hasn't been able to work at all.

And yet, Kendall is an amazingly cheerful man who's determined to get the most out of life. He >>>>

John Kendall's drawing of street scene from the French Quarter in New Orleans, "Time Warp on St. Peter," and a photo (inset) of Kendall working on it using a large magnifying glass with a light to see.



can talk almost endlessly about the places he's been, the people he's met, and the things he's gotten to do. "I guess I've always been positive about stuff," he says. "I could get real bummed out about it, you know, 'poor me.' But that's the hand I'm dealt."

And if worst came to worst? "I was talking to my oldest son, Chris, and he said, 'Dad, I'll teach you how to

play bass guitar!' And I thought, 'Sure, if I can't keep on being an artist, I'm going to stay creative doing something.'"

Not a bad outlook for someone who just turned 70. Sort of:

"Technically, I'm 16 and a half, because my birthday is February 29," he says. And in a very real way, he's both: his full white beard says "70," but his attitude is eternally youthful.

An eye for detail

Ever since he was a kid, Kendall has focused on the little things. He recalls a childhood sketch of his school building, which had exactly the right number of bricks in the exterior wall. He loves detail, whether he's reproducing a street scene or rendering a Tall Ship with all the sails and riggings. All faithful to the original.

Well, almost faithful. Kendall, a resident of George's Mills, N.H., calls his works "timeless scenes" because he removes all traces of modern technology: power lines, cars, trucks, motorboats. And he often adds friends and relatives to his work. As he shows "Time Warp on St. Peter," a street scene from the French Quarter in New

Orleans, and points out where he inserted his two sons, his brother James, one of his dearest friends, his two cats — and himself, the shaggy fellow driving a horse and buggy. "I used to call it my Alfred Hitchcock touch," he says with

a smile. "But when I told that to school kids, they'd say, 'Don't you mean Where's Waldo?'"

There are imagined elements, but the details are resolutely true to life. Kendall works from photographs blown up to

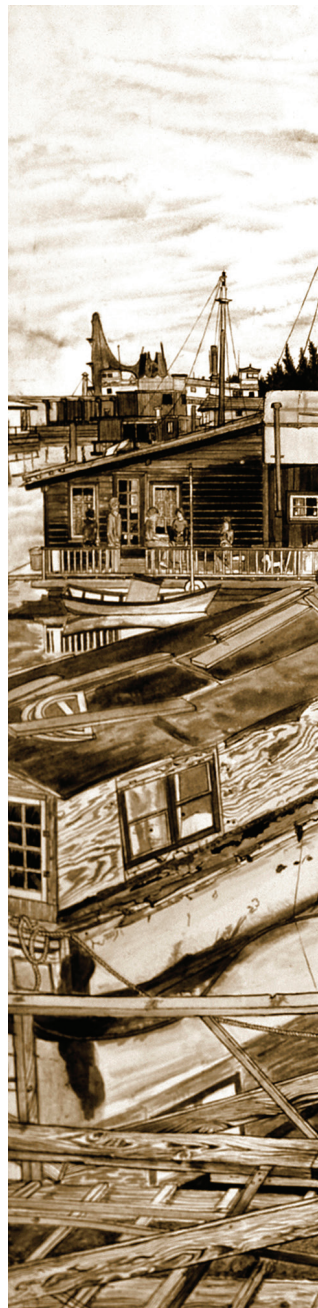
8 by 12, employing a lighted magnifying lamp to closely examine the images. "I'm spending an average of 200 hours and up on an original work," he says.

His style has remained much the same through the years. He's gotten a lot of mileage out of a simple style, which he calls "sepia pen and ink wash drawings." He has a small kit for an artist: one pencil, one pen, two small brushes and a bottle of sepia ink. "That's it," he confirms. He uses pen and ink for the lines, and a mix of ink and water for texture and shading.

Hitting the road and coming back home

Kendall was born in Nashua, N.H., and grew up in Litchfield, N.H. After studying at the University of New Hampshire, he became an art teacher in the Sunapee and New London schools. "When they built Kearsarge Regional High School in 1970, I was offered the art position. It would have been comfortable, but I was starting to get itchy feet. I needed to see if I could prove myself as an artist."

And so he moved to San Francisco, pursued a master's degree in art, and almost by chance wound



Kendall's drawing "A View from the A-Frame" captures the waterfront of Sausalito, Calif. (Right) A photo taken in 1975 of Kendall working on the drawing.

up in Sausalito, Calif. At the time, it was a run-down backwater, not the trendy suburb it is today. "To me, it was like entering an abandoned movie set," with a lot of old houseboats populated by, well, a bunch of hippies. "I saw this fellow sitting on an overturned boat, wearing a captain's hat," he recalls. "It was [writer and musician] Shel Silverstein! He introduced me around. I ended up moving onto an abandoned boat with my brother, James, and a buddy from school. I lived there for six years." He credits Sausalito with >>>>



photo by Larry White



Artist John Kendall in front of his gallery in George's Mill, N.H.

inspiring the ink-wash element of his style: “Everything had a sort of sepia tone. I loved it so much.”

He worked as a street artist. Which, when he started out, was illegal; he and a bunch of fellow artists circulated a petition seeking to overturn the law. They were successful, and Kendall lined up for a license on day one of street-art legality. He took home “license number 30,” he says proudly.

Happy times, but the road continued to call. Kendall moved to New Orleans for a while. “Really enjoyed it,” he says, but then he met an American who had been living on Ibiza, a Spanish island in the Mediterranean. He got passage on

a transatlantic cruise ship, taking “one suitcase with my clothes, and one with my work for sale.” He sold

In the middle of the gallery is something that looks very much like a booth at a diner: two wooden bench seats with a table in between. A large magnifying lamp is attached to the table. This is where Kendall makes his art.

enough on board that he actually made a profit on the trip: “I made my expenses and still had \$150 in my pocket.”

On to Ibiza, where he spent five years; and then to the French Riviera, where he lived in a Volkswagen

bus and made good money doing sketches of rich people’s yachts.

After some 15 years of travel, he wound up right back where he started. In 1983 he followed the Tall Ships to Boston. (His exacting depictions of the ships became his most popular works.) While he was in New England he fell in love with the sister of an old friend, and that spelled the end of his traveling days. He took a job with the Henniker

school district. He got married and had two children, but the marriage ended in divorce after about seven years. The kids, Cody and Chris, are now in their 20s.

The artist’s eye is clouded

He first noticed it when he was



living on Ibiza in the early 1980s. “Little by little, I just could not focus my right eye,” he says. “I went to eye specialists on the island. They did all sorts of tests and said, ‘We don’t know what’s wrong. You just can’t see.’ Well, that doesn’t tell me much!”

The diagnosis came soon after he resettled in New Hampshire: keratoconus in his right eye. Put simply, keratoconus is a weak spot in the cornea. If it’s severe enough, the cornea can burst — which, yes, has happened to Kendall, and it’s just as unpleasant as you can imagine. Over the years he’s had at least three corneal transplants, plus four other eye surgeries.

Kendall retired from teaching in 2010, only to find himself sidelined by another ailment — this time in his right shoulder. (And yes, he is right handed.) “It was like somebody stuck a knife in me.” The diagnosis: a torn bicep caused by the strain of hours upon hours of artwork. “I never thought drawing was hazardous to my health, but I ended up getting shoulder surgery,” he says. “Then it was months of rehab, and I couldn’t draw.”

After that, his right eye took another turn for the worse. That led to a pair of major surgeries in the spring of 2013 which, finally, were

successful. That summer, his right eye got a clean bill of health.

But that’s not the end of the story. Not long after that, signs of cataracts and keratoconus appeared in his left eye. His “good” eye. Which probably means another round of surgeries in his future.

Still, through it all, Kendall has maintained a positive outlook and a determination to keep on working. Even if he someday has to put down his beloved pen and take up the bass guitar.

At home in the studio

Which wouldn’t be as strange as it sounds. His sons are both musicians, and his brother James is a songwriter and recording engineer. Kendall’s studio and gallery, on the ground floor of his home in Georges Mills, is a haven for art and music. The walls of the gallery display his framed prints. The back of the gallery is an open recording studio where Cody and Chris can play and James can record professional quality sound. (They’ve recorded five albums in Kendall’s studio, including two with Maine-based blues singer Charlene Thornton.)

Kendall bought the house in 2000, and the music started almost immediately: “Before we even had the tile on the floor or the walls up, Cody

had a drum set and Chris had a bass, and kids from Sunapee and Henniker would come over and jam out.”

In the middle of the gallery is something that looks very much like a booth at a diner: two wooden bench seats with a table in between. A large magnifying lamp is attached to the table. This is where Kendall makes his art. The setup was built by one of his former art students from Henniker, and a diner booth was exactly what Kendall had in mind. “I like the feel that, if somebody comes to my gallery, I could bring down tea or coffee, and they can sit and be comfortable like in a diner,” he says.

Kendall’s art demands close attention and precision, but he doesn’t mind a little ruckus in his workspace. Indeed, he says it helps: “I’m just surrounded by this intense creative energy.” And, he adds, “just watching my kids progress, it blows me away.”

In spite of all his eye and shoulder troubles, Kendall still has a lot to be happy about. And he chooses to accentuate the positive, keeping his eye on a future full of creative possibilities. **KM**

John Walters (www.johnswalters.com) is a freelance writer, editor, broadcaster, voice artist and author of Roads Less Traveled: Visionary New England Lives. The New Hampshire Writers’ Project gave him the 2009 Donald M. Murray Outstanding Journalism Award for his work in Kearsarge Magazine and Upper Valley Life.

Learn More

Information about John Kendall’s artwork, and his sons’ music, can be found at www.kendallink.com. His studio and gallery are on Main Street in Georges Mills, just off Route 11.



The wooden diner bench is where Kendall makes his art. Above right: The back of the gallery has an open recording studio that records professional quality sound.