Finding kinship creating context inspiring happiness:

Discovery

art duo collaborates at the Packing House

When 35-year Claremont resident Kenneth Johnson ambled into the Packing House studio/gallery of internationally-known artist Yi Kai, his familiar experience of visiting galleries "without thinking too much of them" dissolved, leaving in its place an immediate sense of kinship. An artist and art educator, Mr. Johnson recognized a sophisticated technique and broad vision in Yi Kai's paintings, and was moved and enchanted by the ideas of this artist that were clearly "bigger than just what you're looking at."

Hailing from vastly different backgrounds, the two artists now share the diminutive art loft, creating and dreaming and painting and talking, talking, talking. With their words and their art, the fast and complementary friends commingle their life experiences and forge ahead on their quest to connect people through the visual language of painting, each aiming to encourage new channels for thinking, seeing, communicating and living.

COURIER photo/Gabriel Fenoy

Kenneth Johnson, Claremont artist and art educator, works on a piece from his latest collection in his studio he shares with fellow artist Yi Kai.

"It's synergistic. There's a spoken collaboration that comes from talking about work, art, teaching," said Mr. Johnson, who teaches art at Arcadia High School. "And one that's unspoken. It helps me to be in this environment, around someone that has lived his life as an artist, thinks like an artist. It helps me think about art. Everyday, we share and talk; everyday, we have a conversation about art."

"When I came to this country, I needed—and still need—to learn a lot about this culture and language. I learn from [Ken] about the culture and language. It's a glimpse of regular life," explained Yi Kai, who immigrated to the US from China in 1990. "As for art, Ken teaches every day. He knows what's going on in the art world. I've had serious technical training in China, but no formal education here. Talking with Ken, I learn about American life. It's about establishing a cultural foundation. If you don't know the culture but are trying to do art within it, you fail."

"It's out of context," concurred Mr. Johnson.

Within his 17 years of residency in the US, Yi Kai has thrived in the context of American culture, while never departing from the cultural context of China in which he worked, trained and lived for the first 35 years of his life. On his own with a younger brother after his mother and father were stripped from the family unit during China's Cultural Revolution, Yi Kai had few options. Drafted into the Chinese army at age 15, he spent 14 years in the military, driving a truck from village to village showing propaganda films and eventually painting posters and making woodcuts for army business. Later, after the economic and political situation changed and opportunities began to arise, he landed one of 35 student positions from a pool of 4000 applicants hoping to gain entry into the Art Institute of the People's Liberation Army of China, Beijing. Completion of this degree was followed by two years of professorship at the same institution, a master's degree at the University of Nationalities of China, then two more years as professor.

After the debacle at Tiananmen Square, from which Yi Kai lived only a few blocks away, he immigrated to the US, settling in Minneapolis, and thus launching a cross-cultural art career that bridges his Chinese traditionalism and newfound American immersion. Cultural melding and exchange resonate in the artwork of Yi Kai, who believes that, while no culture is perfect, if the best aspects of each are extracted and combined, only this will ensure the positive growth and survival of the global society.

"If we want to understand each other, understand why we're in this world, we need another culture," he said.

Typical in his work is the fusion of Chinese and English words, Chinese and American emblems and symbols and the presentation of themes that show values both unique to each country and shared between the two. Consider his painting "Symbolic Impressions of America," a sizable red, white and blue painting shaped like the United States and containing a Chinese ideogram for "sky," the letters "www.com," a DNA symbol, the Chinese emblem for earth, a hazy image of a US flag, gender symbols and a prominent dollar sign.

The bold, white dollar sign in the painting represents a passionate strain of Yi Kai's thinking, which is to use art and conversation to steer people away from a rampaging pursuit of material wealth and into a life of spiritual wealth. After years of witnessing the strained economic system in China that renders such a significant percentage of the population impoverished, he is comfortable regarding the US as having "the best" system, but thinks that the unbridled materialism here is problematic and limiting.

"The trouble is that people want more and more and more materials. The US has 1/20 of the world's population, but uses over 25 percent of the world's resources. This cannot be sustained. If we influence the world in this way, we cannot survive," Yi Kai said. "If there is $2 million in the whole world, America has $1 million. This is not good for the future. America needs to stand up to find the way. We cannot just deal in material, we need more spiritual."

Art, he said, is unlimited; creativity and the resulting ignition of the spiritual journey is what inspire happiness—not materialism.

"Creativity makes human beings reach new levels. Without creativity, people have already failed," Yi Kai remarked. "Happiness is not a fancy car, a big house; happiness is found in creativity."

Mr. Johnson, returning to the production of artwork after a long period steeped mainly in the world of art education, is finding that his own rejuvenated creativity is indeed inspiring a new sense of thrill and passion—and happiness—in his own life.

"I wake up in the morning and can't wait to get [to the gallery]. I couldn't sleep last night, I see things, ideas—I just want to get here," said Mr. Johnson, a native of Louisiana.

Describing himself as an "art-gifted kid," Mr. Johnson shared that, even as early as age 5, he carried a sketchbook with him wherever he went and found he could reproduce the natural world quite easily. Later in life, after obtaining a degree in printmaking, he earned a master's degree in art education and a teaching credential. For 25 years, he has been involved in art edu-

COURIER photo/Gabriel Fenoy

Claremont resident and artist Yi Kai rests in his loft/gallery. He shares his love of art and studio space with Kenneth Johnson.

cation, with his own artistic endeavors, which lean primarily toward the abstract, settling beneath his instructional career.

While absolutely delighted about partnering with Yi Kai and finding a space to create where he doesn't have to worry about oil paint on his couch, Mr. Johnson is not certain that producing art on a full-time basis is his ultimate ambition. The substantial fulfillment he achieves through inspiring youth toward creativity and a new way of observing the world continues to entice him toward art education.

"Art full time? That would certainly be a dream. But I don't know if it's a goal or not. I don't know yet. My goal right now is to make art I'm happy with, art that defines things I want to say," Mr. Johnson shared. "I enjoy teaching. It's really a mission to help kids look at the world differently, through the art lens, the culture of art. It does happen, and when kids do it, it's magical. I feel I'm making a difference," Mr. Johnson explained.

The passionate desire to guide people toward viewing the world with a new perspective, a fresh and more discerning manner, is a common thread woven between Mr. Johnson and Yi Kai. Each of them reveres the subtle yet grandiose changes that can occur—in looking, in thinking, in being—when the world is viewed through an artistic eye.

"If you look and listen more carefully, you will always learn. This is the idea for artists, that the eyes become more delicate, sensitive. This is why people should do art—the personality also becomes softer, more delicate, peaceful," Yi Kai said. "In art, you learn color, composition, lines, then even when you're driving, you're observing with an artistic eye. You discover more things, things other people can't see. That's happiness."

Aiming to echo his friend's sentiment, Mr. Johnson explained his recent progression from the notion of "you have to see it to believe it" to the converse philosophy of "you have to believe it to see it." Art, he explained, has prompted this shift in how he observes the world.

"You bring the belief that the magic is there, and then you see it," he said. "It's like you're frontloading your thought process."

Believing that the magic of art and creativity is invaluable, and wanting to see it made manifest, Yi Kai and Mr. Johnson are preparing a workshop, "Happiness of Creativity," with the hope of presenting it at the Claremont Forum, their neighbor at the Packing House. The project proposal emerges from an organization Yi Kai helped found in 2004, "Global Harmony Through Art," which seeks to use the universal language of art to bring peace and harmony to the world.

"Global Harmony through Art provides a free-flowing space with new friends enjoying delicious fun and laughter as we explore unfamiliar surroundings. A feeling of belonging will develop as we work together," states a brochure description of the organization.

The Happiness of Creativity workshop will convene a small group of creative individuals—artists, writers, musicians, philosophers, scientists, etc.—who will each offer a presentation that explores the nature of the happiness they experience when engaged in their creative work. The goal of the program is "to make this 'spiritual happiness' available to everyone and to teach others how to 'tap' into this source of happiness."

"We want people to ask the big questions," said Yi Kai, so sincere in his wish to inspire a change of heart, a change of outlook, a blossoming of happiness in others. "We want people to ask questions in their own life. Then, people can figure out how to do it in their own lives."

The Yi Kai / Kenneth Johnson studio and gallery, which also serves as the GHTA California Center, is located at 532 W. First St., Suite 209, in the Packing House. Hours: Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; closed Sunday. Information: 581-4230;

www.yikaistudio.com;
www.kennethjohnson.com
www.ghta-inc.org.

— Brenda Bolinger

4th of July

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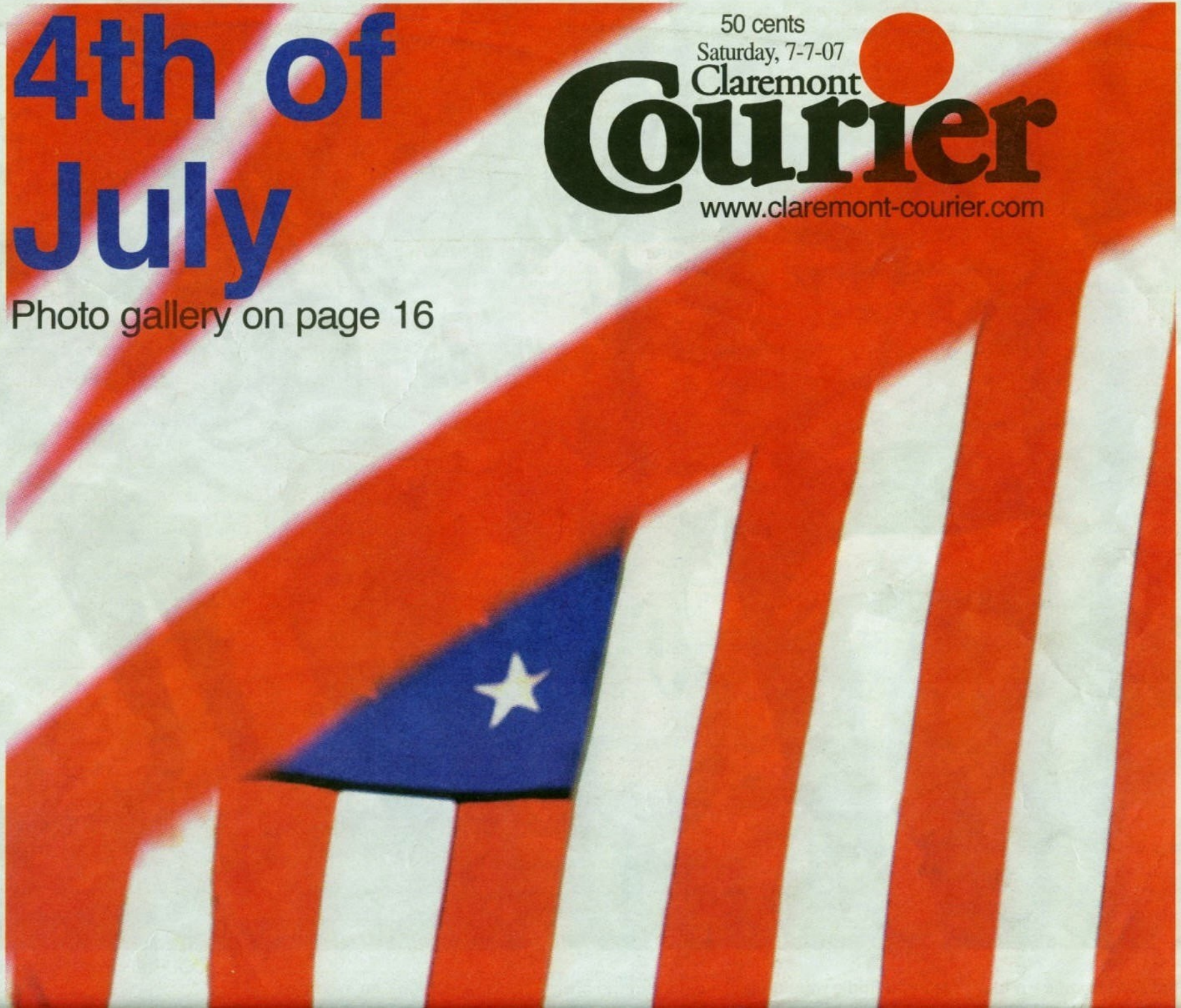
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