



Peony Trilogy



Hindsight

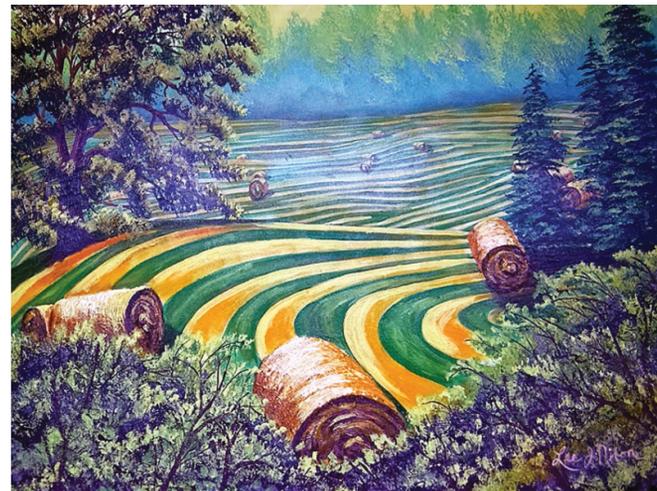
# EXPLOSIONS OF COLOR



Strolling Down Old Rapidan Road

## On display...

Lee Nixon's work was recently on display at Virginia National Bank on Main Street in Orange along with the work of other Orange County art teachers. Their work, the work of his students and that of other Orange County students was featured last month at the Arts Center in Orange's Young Visions exhibit. Also, OCHS was the most represented high school in the state in Congressman Eric Cantor's 2011 Congressional Art Competition. Orange's Courtney Harkness won an honorable mention in that contest. To view more of Nixon's works, visit <http://lee-nixon.artistwebsites.com>.



Field of Golden Splendor



Scenic View of the Blue Ridge

Let's listen in on Lee Nixon's Art II class at Orange County High School.

"I think I'm done," says Rachael Donaldson as she puts the finishing touches on a linoleum block that she has been studiously carving with a gouge. She has to work in reverse, cutting away anything that doesn't look like a moose on a hillside.

"Okay, are you going to put in any details in the back?" asks Nixon. "I can," she responds brightly.

"Yeah, I would put little, fine lines in that, otherwise it'll look more like a silhouette. It'll look better with the little, fine lines."

"Okay," she says pleasantly and goes back to work.

"Everything you carve out will be white, the color of the paper," announces Nixon to the class as a whole. "Everything you don't carve out will be the color of ink." He rolls ink onto Emily Whitten's work and presses paper to it. Out comes an almost oriental-looking landscape. "Cool!" he exclaims. "That is excellent!" Emily beams shyly.

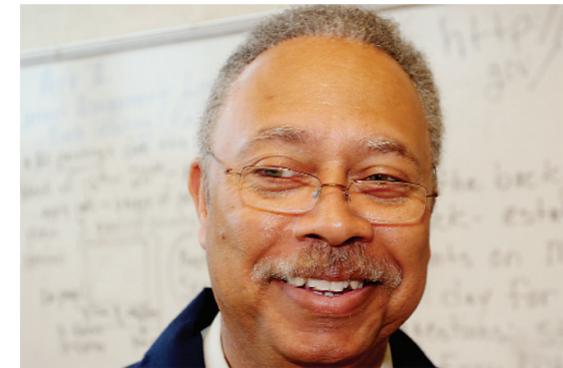


PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Lee Nixon has been the OCHS art teacher for 31 years now. He's not retiring quite yet, but when he does, he'll turn to painting full time.

"Be careful. Be careful," he announces to the class. "I don't want to see blood." Right about then, a girl's hand slips. She nicks herself slightly with the gouge. Although it's barely a scratch, he sends her immediately to the school nurse. "I have to keep warning them to keep their hands away from the blade," he mutters.

Nixon moves on to another student who has said, "I think I kind of messed up the whole painting." The veteran art teacher shifts gears from linoleum block carving, grabs a brush, and makes long swooping strokes. "Never use black by itself. Either make it warm or cool," he counsels. He hands the brush back to the student. "Paint large, then once you paint large, then you go for the small details."

He moves on to Ellie Jeanes who has just started a street scene of San Juan, Puerto Rico. "Now you have a vanishing point probably right here," he says as he works from a photograph on her camera phone to the canvas and back again. "We probably want to use another vanishing point right...here."

"Thank you Mr. Nixon," says Ellie politely.

Here in Art II in mid to late May, some students bend to their work; others goof off and chat. "Senioritis," sighs Nixon with an exasperated eye-roll. Still, it's like a three-ring circus around here. Some kids are carving linoleum blocks from which they will make prints; others are painting on canvas, and everybody is talking at once. Drifting through all this, Nixon serenely demonstrates techniques, gently corrects, suggests and encourages, while alternately dealing with minor emergencies and mundane requests to go to the bathroom.

"I like to keep them busy because time goes by fast," says Nixon who is wrapping up his 31st year as the OCHS art teacher. "I don't like looking at the clock. When they come in here (at 1:40), I look at the clock and when I look at it again, it's 3:00. Class is over. I say 'what happened?'"

Later, he admits, "Teaching takes everything out of you. I did construction work and would come home and take a shower, rest up and eat, and I'd be ready to go. But teaching, whew, it just takes so much out of you.

And you get a little headache because you're dealing with all these different personalities. It just wipes you out."

"We love him," says Julia Yurasits unequivocally as she works on a self-portrait. "Yeah, he's really cool," chimes in Rachael Donaldson. "He's really easy-going." Asked to elaborate on some of his legendary sayings, they both confirm that he says "Outstanding!" a lot, that he wants you to "shampoo" not just clean the brush, and that he frequently calls for "explosions of color."

Well that pretty much describes a Lee Nixon original. When you first see one of his paintings, particularly when you see it in person, you are smacked sideways by the color. Some might say it borders on garish. "Yeah I love color," he bashfully admits, "especially complementary colors. I like colors that excite the eye." He mostly uses acrylic paints and s o m e t i m e s throws in stuff like tissue paper, gravel, egg shells, paper towels, adding, "I love texture. I use texture and the colors to stir up people's feelings. I have a passion for life, for living, and I try to inject that passion into my work."

There is also a certain child-like innocence to a Lee Nixon painting. But once you get past that and the "explosions of color," there is another element that says, 'this guy is onto something; I'm not sure what; but there is more here than meets the eye.'

The folks at the University of Virginia Medical Center agree. Nixon will be the featured artist there a year from now. "I was surprised, I got accepted," he says shyly. This coming summer, he will stay busy creating 25 brand new works just for that show in 2012.

Although he does not proselytize, Lee Nixon is deeply spiritual. He refers to The Revelation, chapter 21, verses 1, 3 and 4, a Bible passage that talks about God joining us in a new idyllic heaven and earth. "Love and happiness are probably the two most important things in my life; love of family and people and peace. You know, everybody working together in harmony toward one common goal. So, I try to create more like a paradise scene, where the earth is like perfect."

Like a certain stretch of the Old Rapidan Road near the top of the hill "where I live at now." This is Lee Nixon's neighborhood. He lives in the same house today that he grew up in as a child. He remembers walking through these very fields and forests with his dad "and he'd tell me about the different trees and herbs and things...I learned a lot about nature from him."

His mother was an artist in her own right, "She was excellent at drawing." He credits both parents equally for his talent. "When I was 12 years old, I did a self-portrait and actually got a likeness of myself." That's when he was a student at then-segregated Prospect Heights. Later he attended George Washington Carver High School for a year, before coming to a newly integrated Orange County High School. He ran track, "the year we won the state championship...I was 133 pounds soaking wet."

After earning a degree in art education at Virginia State University he landed a job teaching middle schoolers in Winchester. Five years later, he came home and has been at OCHS ever since.

Asked if he agrees with Picasso's now-famous statement that all children are natural artists, he says, "Yes, because they don't have the inhibitions that grownups have. Little kids, they would just like eat out of my hand, their creativity was so powerful. High school is much more challenging than middle school, because older kids are not as comfortable and they don't have the confidence and they have a tendency to copy other images. Whereas the younger child, it comes right out of their heart and the creativity is much greater."

In his classes he usually starts with art philosophy, "definitions of what art is and why it's beneficial, how it's constructed to be able to release your feelings, your emotions in a constructive way."

Naturally, he teaches his students to draw first. He claims that if you can write in cursive, you can draw. For hard cases such as yours truly who can't even draw a stick figure, he will have you draw the object upside down. This forces you to move from the right to the left

hemisphere of the brain, engaging your analytical side.

"It's all about training the eye," he says. "Art is coordination between the eye and hand." He once took a photograph "and flipped it upside down and started painting it upside down and when I flipped it back up, it was perfect." He peers through his glasses "Anybody can learn how to draw. The key is creativity. Creativity is when you're creating new things from your imagination." Back to the right hemisphere.

As the semester progresses, the class learns to paint. Nixon relies on techniques gleaned from his own experience and other artists, like the iconic TV art instructor, Bob Ross. (Remember, the PBS guy with the soft voice and the 'fro?) "I learned from him the best way for a student to learn is for you to be an example."

Overall, Lee Nixon teaches 25 different painting techniques. "I believe you start off learning how to paint realistically and then you can move along to other kinds, impressionist, surrealist and so forth. And then from there we get into sculpture, three-dimensional work and then after that, we usually get into print making and then I go back to art history at the very end."

By then the semester is over. "Kids today, they are more challenging," he says, blaming lack of discipline in both the home and the school. "The greatest enemy I have is apathy. You have students come in who are apathetic. They don't care one way or another.

And you work a whole semester and usually in a semester, I turn them on to art, but then," he makes a kissing sound, "you kiss them goodbye." He shakes his head dolefully. Even though art is an elective, he says "I may have a class sometimes, to be honest with you, only 20 percent of the kids want to be in here, but by the time it's over, usually 99.9 percent love the class. But it's hard, though. It's not easy."

"Kids already have to be motivated," he continues. "What I have to do is, I have to stimulate them. I have to make them hungry. And I have to build up their self-esteem and self-confidence. And once I build that up, the kids are ready for me to mold and they can experi-



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
David Pollard continues work on his project as Lee Nixon rolls ink on Emily Whitten's linoleum block.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Lee Nixon teaches by example. Here, he helps Floyd Anderson with his work.

ment and really enjoy themselves."

Because of his naturally gentle and peaceful nature, one might assume the kids take advantage of him. But he counters, "I can be firm when necessary. The voice sometimes can come out from nowhere, and they'll startle. They're not used to me being like that, but there are times when I have to be very firm."

Right about then, he jumps up from his desk and says sharply, "Hey uh, what are you doing with the stapler? You weren't shooting staples at her were you?" A sheepish lad nods in the negative.

The challenge of being an art teacher is dealing with "all different levels and all different personalities," he continues. "You have to know your students...You can go up to one student and say, 'this is not working; this composition is just not working, and you need to do it over again,' and the kid says, 'Okay.'"

On the other hand, "You go over to another one and you tell him the same thing, they'll start crying...or they get angry...You have to find out what they're good at...You have to be very flexible." Besides, he adds, kids are more "fragile," these days.

Being an art teacher also gives him a unique insight into what makes them tick. "I have recognized students who have suffered from depression," he says somberly. "By teaching so long I can recognize some of the slashes and colors of their work, what was going on inside their mind...Whatever's inside of them comes out, the real person. So a person may be very calm, relaxed on the outside, and they may be a raging volcano on the inside. When boyfriends and girlfriends break up, you can tell, because you can see the pain in the art work."

And the humor. It was maybe 15 years ago; he remembers an exceptional class. "We got to know each other. We respected each other. So we, on purpose, drew each other as caricatures. And man, we fell on the floor," he smiles broadly at the memory of it. Nicknamed "Headquarters," because of his broad forehead, he was not immune to the graphic ribbing. "They'd pick some defects, each of us has got a little defect, and they magnified them. And we fell on the floor laughing it was so

funny."

Asked if he's recognized exceptional talent in his students over the years, he mentions several who have gone on to become commercial and graphic artists, others who switched their college major to art from science. Of this year's bunch, he names Courtney Harkness, who has decided to attend the prestigious Savannah College of Art and Design next year.

"He's the best art teacher I ever had, and he doesn't stifle my creativity," bubbles Harkness from behind a pair of outrageous sunglasses. "When you first step into his class, he shows you techniques so you can do whatever you want. He shows a variety of techniques that I had never learned before." She also says it's hard to get an A in Nixon's class, and he confirms he grades



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
Rachael Donaldson works on a linoleum block while Julia Yurasits puts some finishing touches on a self-portrait at Orange County High School's Art II class.

according to each individual's ability. "I dunno," she continues. "he's just the best art teacher, and he'll help you; he's always helpful."

Don't worry folks, even though he's been at it 31 years here in Orange, he's is not retiring; not yet. But when he does, "in a few years," he'll go to painting full time, maybe even teach a little bit at The Arts Center in Orange. He tells a story about going down to his base-

ment studio at 8 p.m. one night. "Want to know what time I came upstairs? 4:00 in the morning! I got so involved with my work; time didn't exist anymore." He won't do that again because "family comes first."

Lee Nixon will surprise you when he says, "Actually, even though I teach, I'm more of an introvert." With art, "You can express yourself in a way that you never could with words. Artists are not the best talkers in the world, but I can express my feelings in a way in a painting with color that I could never do with words."

Some time ago, Lee Nixon painted an idyllic spring-time forsythia-filled scene, an explosion of color, for his brother who was dying of brain cancer. The painting hung over his brother's death bed. After the brother died, Lee Nixon's sister "could see him just coming back alive, coming right through the woods, coming back to life." Lee Nixon's voice softens. "Although my brother and I are not in it, the painting reminded my family of what he loved to do. So, in a sense, it's a portrait of him."