

CHANGING WITH KAT ROHRBACHER

The methods, influences and charm of Fort Wayne's young art star.

By David Tanner

"Shadows, sometimes people don't see shadows. The Chinese of course never paint them in pictures, oriental art never deals with shadow. But I noticed these shadows and I knew it meant it was sunny."

— David Hockney

Like a change of season, artist Kat Rohrbacher erupted on the local arts scene a year or so ago, signaling change and a freshness in approach. The Fort Wayne native and Chicago Art Institute graduate has brought with her a rare element of sophistication and a subtle power in her work that has been a welcome addition to some recent Artlink showings.

Her current "Hallway Show" at Artlink runs through April 4, and she's represented in the "Movement" exhibition there as well. As part of the "Art Scene" series at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art the young painter will give a lecture on April 11, and she's scheduled to stage a show at the Unitarian Church in early May. In October she'll be part of a three-person showing as an Artlink Regional winner. If you can't visit any of these shows you can find her work on her website, katgallery.net.

Her arrival attracted some attentive local media coverage which focused oddly on her personal and private life, packaging pieces around her discovery of, as an adopted child, her birth parents and an extended family. Likewise, as someone afflicted with lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease, she's been framed in some cases as a "health-challenged artist who paints pretty pictures."

Well, let me just say malarkey to all of that. Rohrbacher is first and foremost an energized, developing artist in a variety of media and someone we need to keep track of solely because of her merit and not some backstory line.

When I first encountered her recently in a one-on-one situation at her home/studio on the city's near-northeast side she exhibited a frisky, perky persona that ultimately belied an earnest, directed one. At 23 Rohrbacher could easily be cast as a quirky college co-ed, a role that might otherwise be offered to her favorite actor, Drew Barrymore.

She's chosen a sun room — encased on two sides with floor-to-ceiling windows — as her workspace where she spends her days playing with the light and shadows. And here in this laboratory she conducts her experiments like an alchemist, capturing the filtered sun rays with brush and paint on canvas. Her subjects are most

often figurative, herself and members of her family, along with an occasional animal or butterfly.

She poses her subject's head on as though they are sitting for photo IDs, then laboriously works in brightly colored backdrops that resemble flower-patterned wallpaper. It's a painterly scheme that she follows and will, no doubt, continue to mine as she plots her next series involving other family members.

Surprisingly, two of her biggest influences are the painters Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville. The Philadelphia-born Yuskavage, who developed a reputation as the "bad girl" of the art world in the late 90s, produces these

British bon vivant painter and print-maker, David Hockney. It was Hockney who shocked the U.S. art scene with his renderings of male figures in a directed homosexual context.

The influence of these painters on Rohrbacher's work is actually best reflected in the way she meticulously handles her portraits, skin and flesh tones, a task at which she is most adroit. It can also be seen in two huge scrapbooks she's amassed since high school. Packed with collages, sketches and painted pages, it is here where some of her most evolved projects and ideas can be found. To help support herself the artist has made a series of prints from her notebooks which she offers for sale at very reasonable prices. I found them to be a treasure trove of her talents. In the manner of Kurt Schwitters, Joseph Cornell and Max Ernst, Rohrbacher's collages bring out her propensity to reflect the dynamic, often bizarre nature of modern culture.

Though her illness causes her to tire easily, Rohrbacher continues to practice yoga and is spending more time in the kitchen inventing easily made, healthy meals. Music remains a constant in her daily activities; currently she's stuck on the songs of Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles and Otis Redding. Netflix provides her with a steady flow of movies, and when she needs a brief escape she's even been known to watch "Oprah." It was during a recent episode that she came up with "Change Lupus," her current project that incorporates her own health and her life-long infatuation with butterflies.

It turns out that the butterfly is a symbol that the Lupus Foundation uses to brand its research activity so Rohrbacher has designed a T-shirt to sell to raise awareness and funds for the organization. To that end she'll be offering her shirts at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art on April 12 in conjunction with the performance of Jack Cantey's *A Brief History of Touch* (see the calendar on page 25 for details).

In an enterprise that recalls the Fluxus movement of the 60s as well as Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School of the same period, Rohrbacher participates in a

"Tag Exchange Club" wherein its artist members use common manila tags as mini-canvases which they decorate, paint or draw on, then periodically circulate them through the mail.

Rohrbacher has applied to a couple of prestigious graduate schools

and has already been accepted at one, but she's not certain if she'll take some more time to consider her options and enroll later. Frankly I hope she hangs around town and continues to create her art and contribute to the local scene. She's definitely a keeper.



Top: "RABBIT KID"
Bottom: "KAT KAT KAT"



Penthouse-type portraits of female nudes that play off of male fantasies. They've been described as "abrasive vulgarity" by some critics and seem far from Rohrbacher's tidy and decidedly homey works.

Likewise, the London-based Saville renders large and exaggerated female nudes with weighty globs of paint. Her pieces give a home to zaftig, overweight women and again seem so distant from Rohrbacher. Nonetheless, these painters and their sometimes disturbing work are each exploring light in a neo-realistic genre that grab the viewer and rivets their attention.

Rohrbacher's third influence, maybe not so surprisingly, is the

