

Roger Nielsen: Art + Life in Lowertown by Mason Riddle, July 2015

Roger Nielsen's life as an artist and his life in Saint Paul's Lowertown district are so inextricably linked that only the exhibition, *Roger Nielsen: Art + Life in Lowertown*, could aptly tell the story. "This show is as much a recognition of Lowertown as it is about my art," comments Nielsen. "It is all sort of one and the same."

Nielsen's creative life started early. Born in Minneapolis in 1940, he pegs age five as the year he became an artist. He describes his earliest childhood paintings and drawings as "refrigerator art" as the colorful creations were tacked up here and there, and his grandmother proudly saved them. He also remembers his mother instructing relatives and baby sitters, "If Roger gets bored or gets in your hair, just give him a pencil and paper."

While attending West High School, from which he graduated in 1958, Nielsen took Saturday art classes at Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis School of Art (MSA), now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. His love of drawing transmuted into an adolescent dream to be an accomplished wildlife artist or an outdoors illustrator. "I imagined myself living on some wilderness lake and submitting my illustrations for publication in magazines such as *Field & Stream* or *Fur-Fish-Game*," says Nielsen. MSA professor John Anderson convinced him otherwise, noting that he had "too much talent to be only an illustrator" and encouraged him to attend a fine art school

Nielsen applied and was accepted into the prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he began his studies in the fall of 1959. In 1961 he logged a brief stint in the Navy Reserves after which he returned to art school. Unfortunately, by the spring of 1963, Nielsen's finances necessitated that he return to Minneapolis.

After working for Larson Juhl, the nationally recognized frame supply company, Nielsen designed and opened a frame shop in Gabberts' furniture showroom. In 1964 he opened Nielsen Studio, a frame shop and gallery at France Avenue and 43rd Street in south Minneapolis, where he exhibited his art and work by other artists. In 1969 he sold the shop and moved to rural Wisconsin with the goal to be a full-time artist and to wholesale custom frames. Some five years later, Nielsen returned to Saint Paul and opened R & R Wood Products in the Rossmor Building, a creative hotbed where he thrived on the collegiality of other artists. In 1979 Nielsen bought a vacant Lowertown warehouse at 262 East 4th Street. He moved in, set up his studio and began to renovate the upper floors into studio housing for artists. He also relocated his business to the property's storefront and christened it Master Framers, a name that still stands today.

In spite of Nielsen's peripatetic journey, he continued to create art. The over 100 paintings, prints and drawings in *Art + Life* attest to his practice. Spanning 70 years of productivity, *Art & Life* reveals Nielsen to be a versatile artist who has worked almost exclusively in a representational, figurative style. His medium of choice is oil on panel or canvas, and his expressive, small to mid-scale paintings are enriched by his pen and ink drawings, and a small selection of etchings.

Seldom concerned with being an innovator, Nielsen consciously chose to work within the defining traditions and genres of 19th and 20th century art. His work from the 1960s was influenced by the paintings of his School of the Art Institute professor, John Rogers Cox. Few

subjects have escaped Nielsen's keen eye. Lyrical Northern Minnesota landscapes coexist with lively urban scenes that recall the Ash Can School artists. His robust portraits of blues artists, friends and family are balanced by delicately rendered drawings and paintings of nudes. In addition to his penchant for the human figure, Nielsen's oeuvre is linked together by an underlying narrative thread that is at times oblique but often rooted in a personal experience, whether it is a small moody landscape depicting a boathouse on Lake Superior's North Shore or an expressive reading of a languid nude reclining on a rich red fabric.

"I love to paint the human figure, but I discovered early on I didn't want to be a portrait painter, as you can never truly please the sitter," he comments. "But I love drawing and painting from the model." His portrait of Fats Domino is based on a black and white illustration in a book about the Blues. More illustrative like a cartoon from *The New Yorker* are his animated works depicting jazz musicians and blues artists. Nielsen also reinterprets well-known works by famous artists, such as his translation of an 1888 portrait by Cezanne of his son.

Nielsen still covets the notion of being a wildlife illustrator and acknowledges as a personal hero the highly celebrated American wildlife painter Francis Lee Jaques (1887-1969). Jaques, who lived and worked in Northern Minnesota and later painted certain tableaux at Minneapolis' Bell Museum of Natural History, also plied his talent at New York City's American Museum of Natural History. "I loved Jaques' work and carefully read all of his books," recalls Nielsen. "I started doing pen and ink drawings in the style of Jaques' scratch board illustrations."

That it was a juggling act to run Master Framers, raise children and continue to paint is an understatement. But Nielsen managed. Professionally, he is a respected custom framer and Master Framers' clients include corporations, museums and private collectors. Committed to his trade, Nielsen served on the Professional Picture Framers Association's national board of directors, and chaired its committee that developed the national standards for mounting and framing works of art on paper. "During my seven years on the board, we established the Certified Professional Framer certification test," Nielsen stated. "Thus, we now have an industry that is comprised of true professionals."

Running parallel to Nielsen's framing expertise is his devotion to Lowertown. As a pioneer who was integral in reviving the area from a near-death experience in the late 1970s, he has contributed significantly to its growth and vitality. For more than thirty years he served on the board of the Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation, a non-profit organization that furnished seed money and provided design consultation for development projects, a strategy that changed the course of Lowertown. "It set the stage for the progress, development, and the success we are experiencing in Lowertown today," explains Nielsen. He served on the design committee for Lowertown's award-winning Mears Park and more recently on a design committee for the Saint Paul Saints newly minted stadium, CHS Field.

At age 75 and semi-retired, Nielsen anticipates selling his 262 E. 4th Street warehouse to a like-minded entrepreneur, who will keep Master Framers as a tenant and who will maintain the building as live-work artist studios. Last year he moved with his wife Victoria Gee-Treft to Sarona, Wisconsin, where he now spends four days a week. A rural hamlet near Spooner, Sarona boasts approximately 400 residents and two taverns. Living a rustic, uncluttered existence, Nielsen and Gee-Treft maintain a home, a barn and a workshop on twenty acres of wooded land. Best of all in a life well-lived is Nielsen's 24 x 36-foot studio above the garage, a well illuminated retreat where he can escape every day to paint.