



Life @ The
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Sammie W. King

A Painting Is Worth A Thousand Words

Elizabeth Homan
artistic images



Art without barriers, boundaries or limitations

The astounding creations of

Sammie W. King

All photos by Elizabeth Homan

You've probably marveled at his astounding creations in model homes from the 2014 and 2015 Parade of Homes here in The Dominion. And his work is featured exclusively in the Kuper-Sotheby's International Real Estate office in The Dominion Business Center just outside the main gate. Post-war and contemporary painter, and Dominion resident Sammie W. King enjoys creating and displaying his unique style of art. And he's discovered that the primary keys to success are focus, patience, hard work and perseverance. But, having a little fun along the way doesn't hurt either. Like most painters that gradually accomplish their goals over time; the road to success is very long, arduous and challenging. Progress is very slow. There are numerous "hard lessons" and "hard knocks" along the way. And it was no different for Sammie.

As a kid growing up on San Antonio's East Side in the 1960's, he had always drawn and sketched. He loved Saturday morning cartoons, and was a big fan of Hanna-Barbera superheroes. In elementary school, he enjoyed rendering those cartoon characters as precisely as he could to what he saw on television. In middle and high school, Sammie sketched rockets, military aircraft, and sleek concept cars. Regarding fine art, he was familiar with the work of impressionists' artists like Monet, and van Gogh; and early modernists like Chagall and Picasso. And he appreciated the surrealism of Salvador Dali. But his knowledge of contemporary art began and ended with Peter Max.

While pursuing a degree in commercial art at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) in the mid- to late-70s, Sammie had to also take fine art courses to fulfill curriculum requirements. And in an art history class, he discovered an artistic genre he wasn't

familiar with — "abstract expressionism," currently known as post-war and contemporary. "I was amazed and instantly hooked upon seeing and learning about the work of Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, and Jackson Pollock for the first time," he remembers. Post-war and contemporary art presented a brand new universe that had to be explored! Sammie was now facing a tough choice. Should he change his major and now pursue fine art as his final curricular path, or stick with commercial art?

He ended up deciding, "Since my degree was on the commercial side of the business, I'd first better become the best paste-up artist, graphic designer, photographer, writer, editor, printing manager, and eventually creative director that I could, to make some real money. Then I would 'one-day' pursue fine art, when (or if) I had the time." Commercial art would be the day job ... the real bread and butter. Sammie was well aware of the potential unpleasant realities of pursuing a fine art career straight out of college. And he had no intention of embodying the classic "starving artist." In 1984, Sammie landed an entry-level illustrator position at Ft. Sam Houston, and began making that "real bread and butter." This new full-time position was very demanding, though. And after eight to nine hours a day, he was usually too tired to do anything else. He wondered if the time would ever come when he could pick up a paintbrush or palette knife and pursue fine art on a serious basis.

After about ten years, that time finally did arrive, and his work made more of an impact than even he would have imagined. Sammie had already begun to explore and experiment with the post-war and contemporary style in the late 80's. The work wasn't great, but he now had something that he could actually exhibit. So in the early 90's, he

joined a professional arts group based at the Carver Cultural Center. Along with exhibiting at the Carver, the group also exhibited at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum, Trinity University, Palo Alto College, municipal offices and other San Antonio venues. He quickly gained notoriety as the only African-American painter in San Antonio specializing exclusively in the creation and exhibition of post-war and contemporary art. He recalls, "There was a lot of cautious curiosity, not only about what I was doing, but why? There was confusion, skepticism, apprehension and resistance.

But, there was also excitement, praise, support and encouragement! I had a great time with the members of that arts group, and I greatly enjoyed doing those group exhibits. The camaraderie was wonderful, and I learned a lot. Those are some of my fondest memories since I've been on this journey!"

However, Sammie no intention of creating the type of art that was "expected" from an African-American painter. He readily declares, "I didn't want to fit into any mold. I didn't want to paint what everyone else was painting." Sammie quickly learned to just focus on being true to himself, doing the very best work that he could, and letting the marketplace be the judge. But in those days, the marketplace was not in agreement with what he was doing. "I had a few inquiries, but no sales," he acknowledges. "I contacted local, regional and national galleries. I made sure the right local art patrons and collectors were aware of my work." But again, there was only cautious curiosity. No gallery agreed to a relationship, and no patron or collector wrote a check. But Sammie was patient. He persevered. He continued to paint.

As the 90s progressed, the realities and unforeseen circumstances of life (both good and bad) set in. Sammie had been promoted to a management position at Randolph AFB. That opportunity led to the purchase of a lot here in The Dominion, and started the process toward designing and building his current home. But simultaneously, Sammie's elderly father's failing health took a sudden turn for the worst. Priorities had changed, assisting his father came first. The fine art career was again placed on hold. And another decade would pass.

The 21st century arrived, and Sammie found himself on pretty solid ground. His federal career was stable and secure. He had completed that new home, but deeply missed his father and wished that he could have witnessed his son's success. But, determined to push forward, Sammie decided that now was probably the best time to revisit that illusive fine art career, though now, it was much later in the game than he'd planned. He had moved on from the arts group, and around 2005 made successful contact with a small, but prestigious gallery. The owner and staff loved the work! "After receiving so much resistance without explanation, it was invigorating to finally receive 'validation' without question." And he was surprised, but gratified that they agreed to his price points. "I was always concerned about asking too much, but they were convinced that they could sell my work for what I was asking."

But there was a catch, a 50% commission paid to the gallery for each sale. That gallery relationship, while brief, resulted in two paintings being sold at the prices asked. "I can't begin to express the excitement

In a staging and preparation area near his garage, Sammie uses a mixing tool attached to a drill to combine concrete, sand, paper maché, gesso and other media with water to create the texture used on so many of his paintings.

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of receiving those two checks from the gallery," Sammie says. All of the hard work, patience and perseverance were finally paying off. But, soon after those sales, he realized that there was a sour spot ... that 50% commission. He began to question the wisdom of paying so much to a gallery. So he asked himself, was it worth it to continue paying half of his asking price for gallery representation? Or, should he invest in himself and establish his own fine art business? In 2007, he decided to pursue marketing his artwork directly.

But first, Sammie had to develop a marketing strategy. That turned out to be the easy part. Because any strategy would be driven by two simple questions: 1) What companies, businesses, organizations or individuals were looking for original contemporary art? 2) And, how to get that art in front of them? If he could answer those two questions, he'd be off and running. He'd gotten his State of Texas Business Tax ID Number years earlier, so at least that part was done. Okay, what's next? "I could set up a web site, but that could be a risky and expensive gamble, plus it seemed premature," he recalls. As he considered his options, Sammie remembered always seeing awesome contemporary art in hotels, especially those with a four-star rating. "Well, that's as good a starting point as any," he surmised. But he needed a marketing presentation. So he photographed all of his paintings. Then, using a publication design software package, he created the presentation. Finally, he converted the presentation into an electronic document that he could e-mail to prospective clients. Being a creative director, skilled in photography and page layout allowed him to create the presentation on his home computer without having to hire freelance talent. Next, he did web searches on four-star hotels in the San Antonio area.



After building a list of about 15 hotels, he began making cold phone calls to determine which hotels might be looking to purchase original art for their lobbies, conference centers, restaurants, offices ... wherever. After receiving approval from seven of the hotels, he sent out the presentation. But once again, the market proved to be very tough. While those hotels welcomed the presentation, and even praised the work ... no deal was struck. Then a few weeks later, upon coming in from work, he noticed a message on his answering machine. When he listened to the voice mail, he found out that it was a public relations agent representing Hotel Valencia in downtown San Antonio, one of the four-star hotels that had received the presentation. But she wasn't calling to purchase art for the hotel, though. She was calling to offer something almost as good ... a chance to do a one-man exhibition.

When he returned the call, Sammie found out that Hotel Valencia was starting a new series of exhibitions showcasing the work of San Antonio artists. A separate and intimate dining area in Citrus, the hotel's main restaurant would be the backdrop for the artwork. And Sammie would be the inaugural artist to exhibit in this new upscale venue. He and Hotel Valencia agreed to a six-month run with a reception at Citrus to launch the exhibition. Instinctively, Sammie began thinking about how to best market the reception and exhibition. While Hotel Valencia did

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have its own marketing team that would promote the event, Sammie wanted to ensure that as many people as possible were aware. So, he took out a two-page advertisement in San Antonio Magazine. And the timing couldn't have been better. As it turns out, the schedule of the reception and part of the exhibition coincided with the production cycle of SA Magazines' annual Luxury Edition that would come out in January 2008. The ad turned out better than he'd hoped; and the reception went very well with friends, family and members of the general public attending.

At this point, any credible move forward without a web site would have been totally impossible. So Sammie began designing the site with photo editing software. He based the look and style of the site on the marketing presentation he'd created earlier. He then dropped the files off at a local ad agency, and they programmed the site to his specifications. The initial incarnation of the web site was primitive (compared to today's version), but still effective. So at that moment, Sammie W. King contemporary was founded! Now, the focus had to become producing exciting, world class artwork at a consistent volume, while maintaining excellent quality. Sammie continued to develop and improve his unique and highly specialized style of imagery creation. He combines latex, acrylic, tempera, metallic and enamel paints with plaster, paper maché, modeling paste,

concrete and sand. He wasn't aware of any other artists using this unusual combination of media and materials. Sammie explains, "I rarely have preconceived ideas or plans about what I'm going to paint when I approach a blank surface. Unlike the subject matter for representational art such as mountains, rivers, buildings or people, I believe that non-representational image creation doesn't need to be based upon any type of pre-existing matter, but instead be freeform, spontaneous application of media to canvas."

Freeform spontaneity however, can have its drawbacks. One of Sammie's favorite pieces entitled Prometheus hangs prominently in his living room. This sculptural relief is 64" high x 49" wide, weighs about 300 lbs., and is freeform spontaneity to the extreme! "This was the first time I found myself using stones, crushed glass and glass beads. This was also the first time that I'd worked on 3/4" medium density fiberboard or MDF. It's a very thick, solid and heavy material," he says. And holding it all together ... acrylic resin. The

Seated at his dining room table, with one of his most popular creations, Ethiopia, prominently displayed in the background just above the buffet cabinet.



fumes from acrylic resin are extremely toxic. "I had to use a respirator the entire time I was creating it." Then, something unusual happened. Sammie confesses, "I got so excited about this piece that I literally couldn't stop working on it, or adding to it. Once I'd finished it, I began thinking about installation. But when I tried to lift it, to my surprise — I couldn't! Only then did I realize, this creation had absolutely gotten away from me! I'd completely lost control of its size and weight. When installation time did arrive, I enlisted the help of a high school buddy and my cousin to help me haul Prometheus into place, then lift it up and onto brackets (designed to wall mount a 70" HDTV) that were bolted into the wall studs and into the back of Prometheus. And it was still a major struggle that took hours." Sammie admits with a laugh, "That was definitely a 'one-time permanent' installation!"

Sammie works out of his home located in The Gardens section of The Dominion. My home is two houses from the 14th Green. It's so beautiful and peaceful. It's the best inspirational environment for an artist!" His two-car garage has become the perfect "quasi-art loft" with more than enough room to work a large canvas. The pieces are usually very complex, color and media-wise, and require full focus and concentration. And though his creative and production processes are very tedious and slow, he decided from very beginning never to use assistants. "I didn't want anyone else ever touching my canvases; adding color, texture or highlights. It's not pure, it's not true. It just wouldn't be my work." Sammie believes that this enhances the integrity of the work. He also decided early on never to produce posters, copies, reproductions or giclée prints. He confirms, "I only create original, one-of-a-kind pieces. Since that's the only type of art I would purchase for myself, I determined that that's the only type of art I would create for my clients. Collectors that acquire my work can truthfully claim — 'this piece is only the one that exists in the world!'" Sammie is convinced that these critical steps in quality control establishes, maintains and increases the value of the work over time.

In his garage studio, five 6' long folding tables hold a potpourri of paints, inks, glazes, brushes, varnishes, resins, solvents, palette knives, trowels, a table saw ... you name it. Bags of gravel, sand, concrete and other construction materials are stacked in a corner of the garage. And like most professional artist's studios, it's a controlled disaster area. He works on his canvases as they lie flat on his garage floor or on one of those folding tables. A guest suite just off the garage serves as a preparation and staging area, as well as a storage room for completed works. With San Antonio's weather being pleasant most of the year, Sammie's back patio provides an excellent setting for a second studio, with South light enhancing the creative process, and beautiful landscaping providing a nice backdrop. Patio ceiling fans provide a cool breeze, and occasional direct sunlight assists in drying paints, texture, resins and other media. "Being able to work from home is an incredible blessing," Sammie says. "Everything is right here. I start and stop when I want. There are no long commutes, traffic headaches or office conflicts. It couldn't be more efficient."

Currently, Sammie provides original works of art to luxury residential and commercial interior designers, Realtors and high-end custom builders for their parade, model and custom homes or commercial projects. He also has a list of private clients that have purchased work previously. At various times, his work can be seen in model homes around The Dominion. "San Antonio and Austin

architects and builders are designing and constructing more homes and office buildings in the ultra-contemporary, neo-futuristic, mid-century modern, and international style. This makes post-war and contemporary art the perfect fit for the current San Antonio and Austin luxury interior design market. This trend is also catching on nationwide."

And after all of this time, Sammie admits he's still having fun. "I retired from federal service in 2014, so I'm financially secure. I can now focus on painting full-time." He clarifies that while creating, exhibiting and selling art is a business; it has never been about acquiring wealth or achieving fame. His only goal has always been to just enjoy the process and strive to create breathtaking results. He maintains a reasonable production schedule, creating on average, three to five pieces every few years. And he looks forward to doing this the rest of his life. He boldly affirms, "I will always create art, not because that's what I do, but because — that's who I am." **LD**



Sammie's covered back patio proves to be the perfect second studio, especially on a bright and sunny day. Here, he directly applies freshly made concrete-based texture to a new creation, entitled "Currency." Color media and clear sealant will be applied later. Occasional direct sunlight hastens the drying process.