

'Plein air' painter conducts art workshop locally

by Elane Ertman
Staff Reporter

A nationally known artist, Billyo O'Donnell, recently conducted a three-day workshop in this area, doing paintings and instructions at several different locations. The Cat Ranch Art Guild of Marble Hill sponsored the event, and about 20 local artists participated in 'Plein Air Painting,' which translates from the French to mean painting in the open air.

The workshop is part of an on-going project of O'Donnell to paint on location in all of the 115 counties in Missouri, and to combine his artwork into a one-of-a-kind book.

O'Donnell is a Missouri native, who grew up west of St. Louis, sort of in the middle of nowhere, he says. As a youngster he enjoyed lots of time to roam the countryside and experience the outdoors. He says that even as a child when his siblings were making mud sculptures he was making much more elaborate ones. In school he loved to draw and spent lots of time sketching. His art skills earned him a scholarship to a junior college where he acquired an associates' degree. He later graduated from Southwest Missouri State University with a bachelor's degree in fine arts.

After college he landed a job with a large motivational organization, privately owned, which did work for many big name companies, such as Disney. For 13 years O'Donnell worked as an illustrator, until he left the company. He won numerous national and international awards for his work, including National Oil and Acrylic 'Best use of light and color' in 1999, and Painters Society Exhibition in 1996 with his design selected for the State of Missouri license plate. He received the Missouri State Community Colleges Award for 'Achievement in the Arts Artwork' in 1996 and this work was selected for use by the

Board of Tourism of Austria. His artwork was selected for the cover of Japan's Creators Association Annual, a publication of works of artists around the world, in 1994.

While he was traveling and painting in California, O'Donnell's artwork was chosen for exhibition at the Joan Irvine Smith Art Institute, one of the premier art institutes in the country. O'Donnell said that this was a changing point in his life and he became more involved with other artists and other art organizations. He discovered that his artistic skills offered him many opportunities for work and travel that he had never anticipated. "I never thought my art would take me to such places," he stated. He has traveled extensively around the country and the world on various painting assignments.

A few years back O'Donnell came up with an idea to paint landscapes of Missouri, with a project called 'Artists Along the Katy Trail.' He says the idea wasn't all his own, but was a compilation of ideas of many creative people. He helped organize a group of 200 artists who traveled for 16 days along the 227-mile Katy Trail, painting on site along the way. This project allowed people to meet and talk with the artists and see them at work, O'Donnell pointed out. The project proved to be such a success that the second year nearly 900 artists signed up to participate.

O'Donnell undertook a recent project as a "challenge to push myself." He has done oil paintings of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He received the complete cooperation of the orchestra, including a full dress rehearsal so he could complete the paintings.

The artist's on-going project to paint in every county in the state has already taken him to many small communities, such as Marceline, the lo-



Billyo O'Donnell, nationally recognized as one of the top 50 "plein air painters" in the country, recently held a three day workshop in this area.

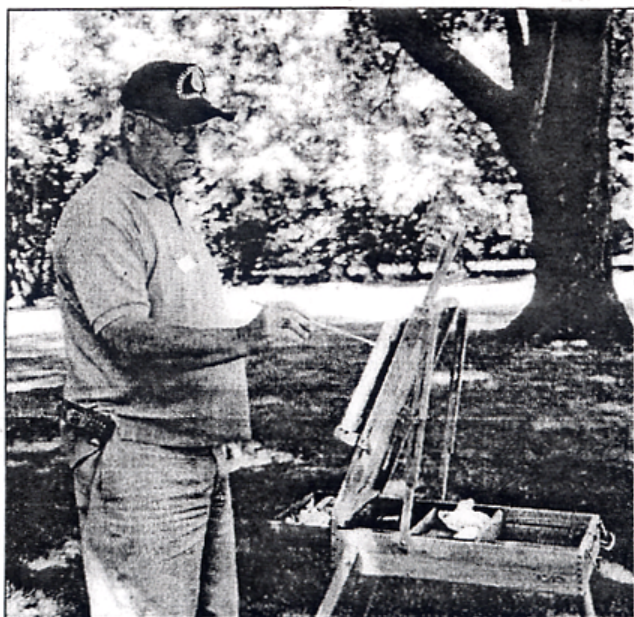
cation where Walt Disney modeled Disneyland's 'Main Street USA,' to Ralls County, where the community is bonding together to restore its historical courthouse, and a town in southeastern Missouri where people come from across the U.S. to choose a premier watermelon. While O'Donnell creatively paints the scenery, his partner in the project, Karen Glines, is writing stories about the towns he visits. She interviews contacts and researches unique features for each area, and at times even travels to the counties and visits with local residents to hear their stories. The material that she gathers will combine with O'Donnell's paintings in the book.

O'Donnell says that Painting Missouri involves "catching just the right moment" when painting outdoors, often camping out so that he doesn't miss the next morning's sunrise. This may include being in the midst of a snowy, icy night, or a humid, steaming day, so that each inspiring season is significantly represented within the state. He thinks of his painting as a diary of his artwork, telling a story of himself at that moment when he paints. It reminds him of how he must react spontaneously to inspiration in life, he says, or chance losing that significant experience.

When asked about the greatest pleasures in his profession, O'Donnell says, "It is the experience

of painting outside. The snow, strong wind, cold, muggy heat, mosquitoes, they all remind me of life and how we must stay focused and keep pushing on. As I think about masses, color, relationships, the harmony of the piece, value, strokes and textures, and combine them with the energy of the land and the environment around me, it transcends the quality of staying focused and persevering in life."

You can learn more about O'Donnell and travel along with him as he visits Missouri and see some of his artwork on his website at www.PaintingMissouri.com and www.Billyoart.com. He is currently searching for towns to visit and paint in the state and would like to have suggestions from anyone in the community. His work is currently on exhibit at Gallery Grace in Laguna Beach, CA and at Kodner Gallery in St. Louis.



Herb Wickham of Jackson was one of the participants in the art workshop.