

# Art, Detoxed

Studio Q's namesake keeps art real and personal.

words KIMBERLY WINTER STERN | photo PAUL VERSLUIS

Robert Quackenbush stops in front of a painting, hands shoved into his jeans, his permanently arched eyebrows furrowed as he intently studies the brilliant orange, red and ecru canvas. To the newcomer at Studio Q, Quackenbush appears ready to spout off a litany of art school logic—about why the colors aren't working or the texturing isn't quite right or perhaps why the technique is sloppy.

So it comes as a surprise when Quackenbush chats quietly with the student and uses her paintbrush to demonstrate his idea. The two—mentor and student—spend a moment in creative contemplation, huddled over the canvas. She agrees with Quackenbush and resumes her work with a new perspective.

The stocky, middle-aged artist has tutored a merry band of students—some with art training, some novices, some never-evers—each Monday and Wednesday afternoon for the past four years in his Leawood home's lower level-turned-art-studio/library. Quackenbush—not a typical art instructor—offers criticism, but not without a dose of positivity and never in a patronizing tone; he is encouraging, reminding students not to get too “precious” with their art. And constantly, Quackenbush admonishes students that the delete button—or the trash bin—is their best

friend in this avant-garde laboratory of unhinged inspiration.

“I want people to come here and let their imagination run wild,” says Quackenbush in his matter-of-fact, shoulder-shrugging attitude. “I learned a long time ago that real painters paint for themselves and not other people.”

As if to validate this approach to art, Quackenbush cites a trip to Philadelphia he and his wife, Merry, just made.

“We went on a tour of some of Andrew Wyeth's work at the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa., with his granddaughter, Victoria,” he says. “She told us that her father painted only what he wanted to paint. ‘I paint for me,’ he said to her.”

The group gathered on this mid-April Wednesday afternoon is comprised of five Studio Q fanatics. Nancy Beaver is entering her third year at the suburban art haven; she was a commercial artist decades ago and four years ago started drawing and taking sketch lessons.

“I realized my husband and I were going to be empty nesters soon,” says Beaver. “I had for years done everything for everyone else—it was time for me to pursue an interest.”

Beaver met Quackenbush when she was part of a small group creating an exterior set for her

son's school production of “Rent.”

“He donated the cardboard for the set and I went to pick it up one day,” she says. “I walked into the lower level and saw four women painting and asked him if there were any openings.”

Beaver is a lover of saturated color, and often works from photos snapped during her travels. Today she's working on a door she shot on a recent journey to Tuscany. Quackenbush has given her some tips on bringing the door's ancient stone frame into the front of the picture—the dimensional effect coaxes the painting to life. Beaver has sold her art professionally, shown her work and organized the American Royal Art Show.

Kate Faerber has been attending Studio Q for three months. She became interested when pal Lori Keenan, another three-year student, convinced her to try out the informal setting.

“I have a degree in graphic design, but I've never painted with oils,” she says. “I'm enamored with the process. Robert helps us not be frustrated when our painting isn't matching the vision in our heads. And having peers here to give honest feedback is crucial to my growth.”

Keenan, who has a degree in illustration and worked at Hallmark before raising a family, calls herself a realistic painter; Quackenbush has a plan to mount two 48" by 48" canvases in the studio for a Jackson Pollock-like exercise where they'll work side-by-side. “We're going to hurl paint and get you loosened up,” he tells Keenan.

The group offers a hearty laugh of support for Keenan—they've all been challenged at one time or another by Quackenbush.

“There are no restrictions here, no distractions,” says Keenan. “Robert has great resources—he's the supply king.”

Kim Fiss is another Studio Q-er who has been coming each week for nearly three years. “I minored in art in college and did drafting and technical drawing in my job,” she says. “This atmosphere exposes me to other artists and their experience.” Fiss takes her wet paintbrush and points to each student in the room. “He meets all of us where we're at,” she says, turning her attention back to a stunning environmental scene of a burbling creek and sun-dappled trees.



## BEHIND THE SCENES

Ginger Lunt, a real estate agent, has been coming to Studio Q for two years. She met Quackenbush through a bartender who saw a painting Lunt produced at another studio's class. "He told me I really should contact this artist," says Lunt. "I e-mailed Robert that evening."

Lunt has had two showings in the Crossroads Arts District and was accepted into a juried art show two years ago. Her first painting was of some calla lilies in Santa Fe; 19 canvases later Lunt mostly paints for family and friends. "My initial class here was pretty spiritual," she says. "I really got in touch with something special."

Today Lunt is painting her sister's deceased dog, a Labrador with eyes and an expression that immediately invokes emotion. "She'll like this," murmurs Lunt, concentrating on adding hues of orange to the canine's coat, making the image jump to the front of the canvas. "This is what Robert suggested. He was right," Lunt says, stepping back to survey her work.

Quackenbush floats from student to student, canvas to canvas, clearly enjoying the camaraderie and easy give-and-take of Studio Q.

"Innovation takes you into invention, which takes you into the unknown," he says, pausing for effect. "And that puts you squarely in the heart of risk."

That pretty much sums up Quackenbush's take on pursuing inner creativity. "*Look inside,*" you can almost hear him saying, "*and don't get hung up on formalities or color.*"

Paint, on! ❖

Robert Quackenbush, a native of New Jersey, started painting when he was 25. He worked for IBM for 14 years, joined a small family-owned consulting business and later owned a business of his own. It was 15 years ago that Merry convinced him to pursue his artistic passions.

"It took me a year to give myself permission to do that," says Quackenbush, who prescribes to the Russian artist Kandinsky's notion that art is a reflection of personal experience and comes from the soul. "I paint, I experiment, I sculpt, I do print-making."

From 1996 through 2005, Quackenbush studied with Italian-born, Yale-educated artist Alexander Shundi every Monday.

"I would drive 200 miles roundtrip to go to his studio in Amenia, NY," he says. "He taught me how not to be afraid of my imagination and to create work that made uncommon sense."

*To find out more about Studio Q or where Quackenbush shows his work this summer; check his Web site at [www.artbyq.com](http://www.artbyq.com).*