



art

Start Spreading the News

*An artist transplanted
from New York City
makes a brand-new start
of it in Learwood*

Quackenbush, working on
"Red Sky in the Morning..." which will be
donated to the Kansas City Artists Coalition's
annual fundraising auction to be held
on Feb. 17.

BY MAUREEN SULLIVAN

Robert Quackenbush has had a good year.

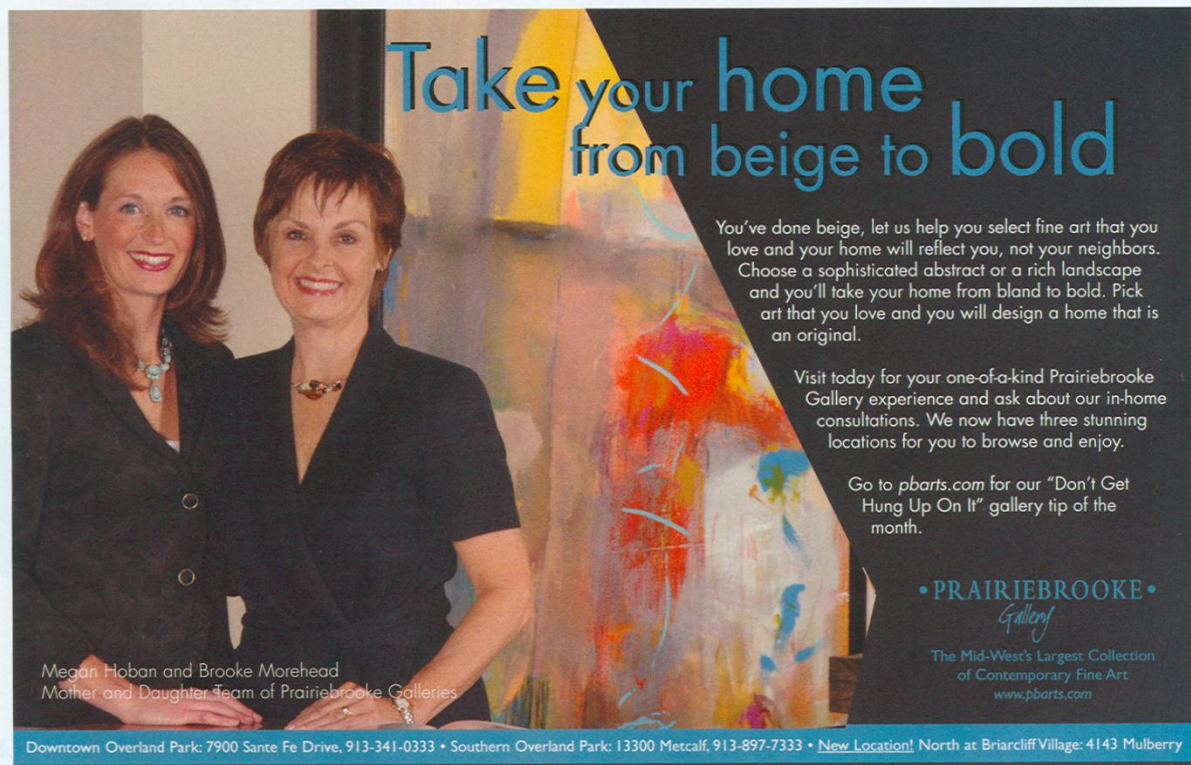
"I've had more attention here than I could have had in the South Bronx, ever," says the 62-year-old artist, who lives and works out of his home in Leawood. "It's been a pretty active year for me."

That's a pretty big statement for a full-time artist leaving one of the country's top art meccas. Quackenbush, who with his wife relocated to the area for family reasons in early 2005 from New York, left an Upper East Side apartment, a spacious studio in the South Bronx and, of course, the New York City art community. But what he's found in Kansas City is a hidden gem — an emerging, substantially vibrant art community with ample opportunity.

"I would have never gotten this much attention from high-level curators and corporations in New York City," he says. And the list of locals who've been to see his work is impressive. Bill North, senior curator at Kansas State's Beach Museum of Art, has been to Quackenbush's studio, which occupies the lower level of his Leawood home. Caleb Fey, curator of corporate collections at American Century — a company known for identifying and collecting the work of talented regional artists — has stopped by as well. Bruce

Hartman, a much-lauded talent-seeker and director of the Johnson County Community College Gallery of Art and the upcoming Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, accepted a piece of Quackenbush's for the JoCo gallery's biennial fundraising auction in 2005 and has been out to see his work. And James Martin, the curator of the Sprint/Nextel Art Collection who's been noted as an up-and-comer with a good eye (especially for new local artists of note), has been to Quackenbush's studio.

Apparently, these visitors liked what they saw. Quackenbush had a three-month, 30-piece solo show at the American Century headquarters last spring after Fey saw his work, and Martin later acquired one of his pieces for the Sprint/Nextel permanent collection at a Kansas City Artists Coalition auction. Quackenbush was invited to speak at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art's "Slideshow" series, which highlights emerging, midcareer and established local artists, after Christopher Cook, the Kemper's assistant curator, came to his American Century show. He's shown work in juried group shows this year at the Kansas City Artists Coalition and at the New Arts Gallery in Litchfield, Conn. And he was nominated by renowned local artist Jane Voorhees to join the Hand Print Press, a group of a dozen or so printmakers at the University of Missouri-Kansas City,



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after impressing her while taking her printmaking class at the Kansas City Art Institute. "I always wanted to be a printmaker," he says.

Indeed, his path to printmaking is emblematic of his charismatic and bold style. When he got interested in printmaking, Quackenbush says, he announced to his wife that he was going to buy a press. ("I don't know anything about moderation," he says.) She suggested that he first take a class in printmaking to be sure he really liked it before investing so heavily. "Cooler heads prevailed," as he puts it, and he ended up in Voorhees' class — with great success.

Quackenbush has approached painting with similar gusto. After a true moment of revelation one Saturday morning in his 20s in which he thought, "I'm supposed to be a painter," Quackenbush jumped in his VW

about ARTIST

To see more of Robert Quackenbush's work, contact him at (913) 814-7510, or visit his Web site at www.artbyq.com.

bug and went to the art store, bought supplies and just started painting with no formal training. "I was a doodler," he says. "I'd never painted before."

He spent the next 25 years taking classes at various art schools when time permitted. And in 1996, he turned to painting full time. After that, he says, "It was, 'Katie, bar the door.'" Since 1997, he's had five one-man shows in New York City, Connecticut, Montana and Missouri with the American Century show; he's been in multiple juried shows and participated in the Empire State College Studio Art Program while in New

York City, where he received favorable critiques from Robert Storr, then a curator of painting and sculpture at the New York Museum of Modern Art.

His paintings exude that no-holds-barred spirit. Large in scale, his work is often on canvases ranging from 40 inches by 80 inches to 63 inches by 84 inches. He works in series, with more than one piece at a time in progress, most of which are abstract in style (though he does do some figurative work as well). These ongoing series fall into three camps: alternative landscapes, which combine the horizon line

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of a landscape with abstraction; grid-based work, in which hand-painted geometrics are anchored in a grid and juxtaposed with an abstracted field, often accented by dripping paint; and wallscapes, which incorporate remembrances of walls seen in subways or on old buildings and have lots of texture.

Quackenbush says he has no idea how a painting will turn out when he starts it and that he likes not knowing how it will turn out. "When you deal with experiment, you deal with invention," he says. "When you deal with invention, you deal with the unknown. And when you deal with the unknown, you deal with risk. Risk is a place I like to be."

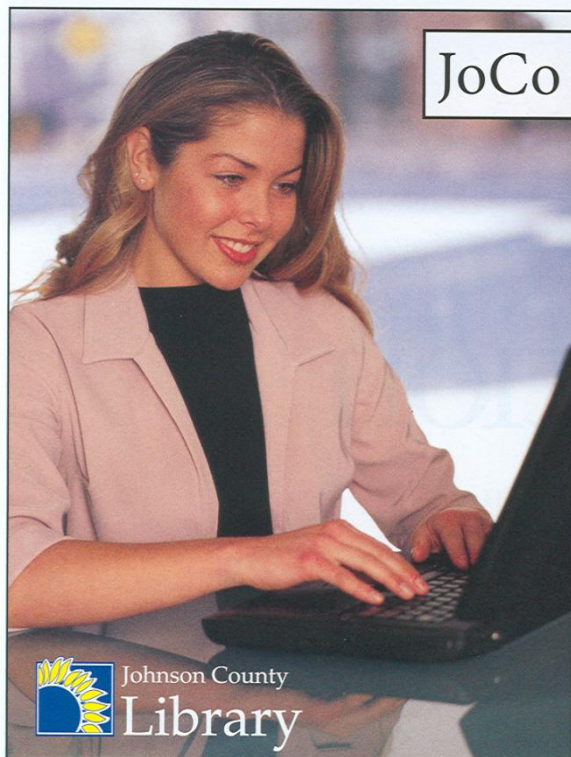
If this year turns out anything like last year, Quackenbush has a lot to look forward to. His momentum doesn't show any signs of slowing down. In addition to having artwork in a group show in November at the KCAI Crossroads Gallery, Quackenbush has two of his own shows slated for later this year: one hosted by the city of Merriam in September in conjunction with one other artist, Glen Hunter, and a one-man show to be presented by the city of Roeland Park in December.

And is Leawood the next Chelsea or SoHo? Probably not, but it will work for Quackenbush. "People hear I work [in my home] in Leawood and see my gray hair and think, 'Oh, he's retired. That's a



"wallscape 44," 2000, mixed media, 40 inches by 40 inches

nice hobby," he says. "This is a passion, man. It's not a hobby." ♦



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