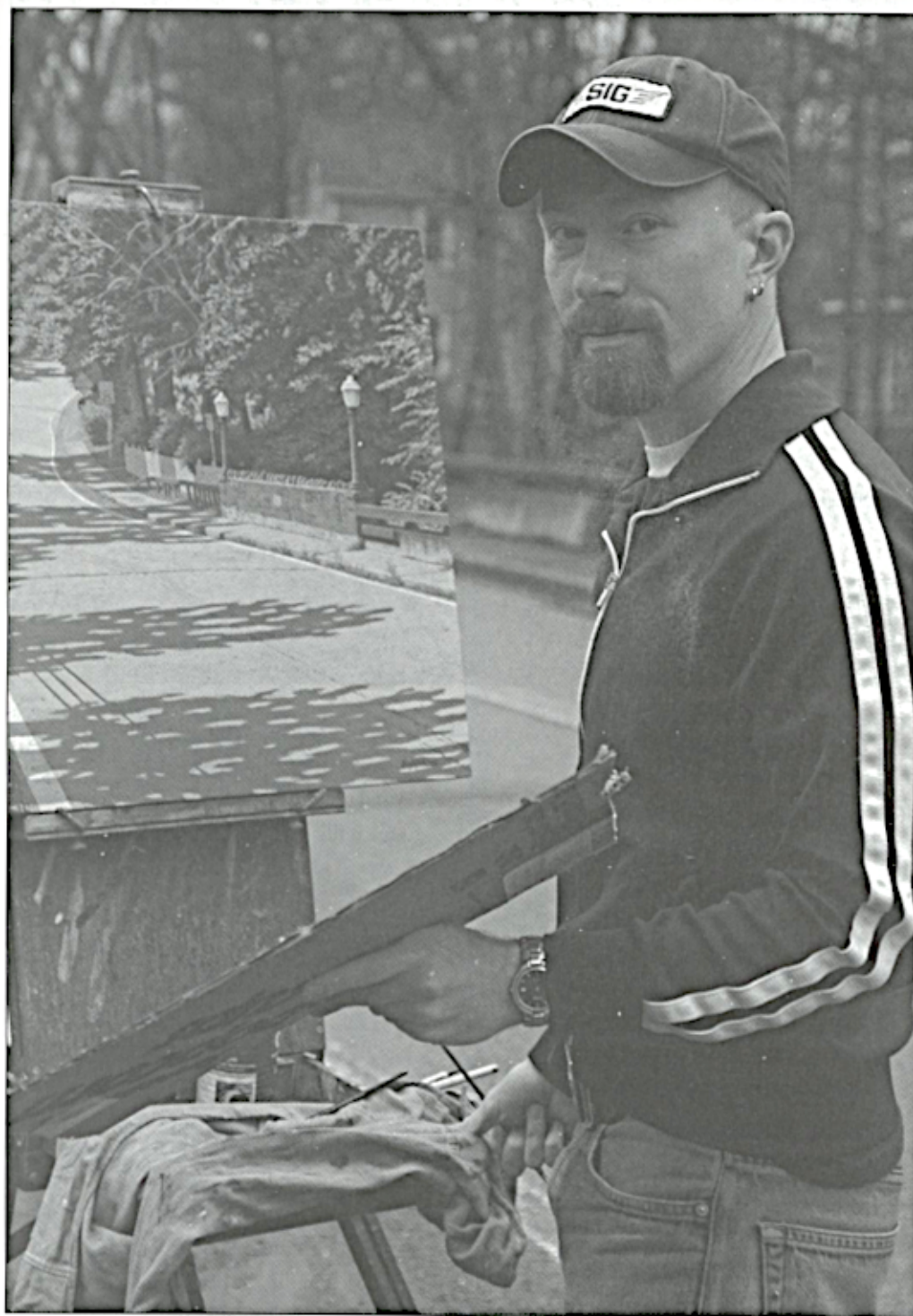


# Painter LAUREATE

BY Annie Kane-Horrigan PHOTOS BY MEGAN McQUADE



JOEL GRIFFITH PAINTING EN PLEIN AIR IN TIVOLI

Joel Griffith has an objection. In a patient voice that belies the frequency with which he has to correct people, he explains that he prefers his work not be called "photo realism." He prefers "observational realism." Photo-realism is inaccurate because, he says, "I am the camera, only difference is that my exposure time might be four months."

Griffith, at 29, is the "painter laureate" of his hometown Tivoli. He's been commissioned by the village to paint the town's portrait in a series of four oil paintings, and damned if those paintings don't look like photographs. Unlike a photo, though, the paintings have a depth to them. You feel like you have stepped into the frame; the landscape is alive and full of light and imagined sounds.

"I want to create an image that gives a bodily response," he says as he points to *Four Post Bridge*, one of the commissioned works that depicts the landmark bridge which lies at Tivoli's point of entry. "There's an interesting balance to representational painting because you have an eye toward doing the production technique. You're painting and saying, 'Wow, I can finally make that look like this,' but you don't want it to just be about the technical execution; you want it to also be about a way of looking at places in the world."

Painting from life means Griffith is on very public display, and he takes great pleasure in meeting people through his work. "I get the college students, I get the weekend yuppies," says Griffith. "I get everybody, and everybody has a different take on this guy standing on the side of the road painting the bridge for, like, the whole summer."

The time it takes to paint as well as unpredictable human alterations to scenes both pose a real challenge to someone committed to working directly from life. "With these street scenes I paint, someone might have their bedroom light on and I'm actually using that yellow square for a compositional element. But then they go to sleep and the square disappears. Or I'll paint a street with a car and the car will drive away. It's all part of working outside where you're not in total control, as opposed to working in a studio where the apple I'm painting is not going to get up and leave."

Seasonal changes create complications, as well. "I was working on these paintings in September and October and then all the leaves fell off the trees and it got too cold to paint outside. At that point I could have taken a photograph to finish it over the winter, but I thought then the painting might be too flat. When you paint from life you get life in the picture. So I decided to wait, and already one business has changed hands, and a building was painted a different color."

Griffith has a strong awareness of the interplay between humanity and nature, and that seems to be where the real frisson happens for him. "I've tried to go to places like Clermont Park, where it is all too...groomed. I find it difficult to make a painting there."

You won't find any people in Griffith's landscapes, and there are reasons for that: "Humans are just outside of the pictures, but the residue of humanity is everywhere."





So there are power lines and mailboxes and tire tracks in the snow. It may be here that Griffith's paintings are at their most powerful: They seem to capture a chance moment when the people who ought to be populating the frame have just stepped away. "When you have people, when you have figures and faces in the painting, people are going to hit that first and stay there. So you get the people out of the way and that lets you think about the other things that are going on."

"Besides, folks who don't know the history of my work look at these landscapes and say, 'There are no people here.' They don't know that I spent 10 years drawing people—little purple and orange people."

Griffith had a distinctive cartoony style that was his signature for the first decade of his artistic career, especially in high school. It featured vibrantly colored figures that burst through walls and reached out of the frame towards the viewer.

"I had really positive experiences with the teachers at Red Hook High School who just gave me a lot of support, a lot of room to grow." The culmination of his high school artwork was a massive mural he painted as a spoof of Raphael's *The School of Athens*. Griffith's version was a caricature of more than a hundred Red Hook students, teachers, and administrators all together in the frame. The mural still hangs in the high school.

**After graduating** from Grinnell College in 1996 and enjoying a stint abroad, Griffith enrolled in the MFA program at Bard College, where he was shocked to find the staff unwilling to accept his cartoon style of art as the focus of a graduate program.

"They were like, 'Okay kid, you got to stop doing cartoons.' Initially it was just something that Bard forced on me, which was tough...but after three years of doing it, I realized they gave me a good, much-needed kick in the pants, and I'm very invested in this now."

But it was hardly easy. As Griffith is quick to point out, "When you're good at

something, you don't want to put it down." He sighs. "Will I go back? I have this whole camp of supporters who keep asking me, 'When are the orange guys going to pop over the bridge?'"

**Among his supporters** is the mayor of Tivoli (and fellow Red Hook High School graduate) Marc Molinaro, who arranged for Griffith to receive the commission to paint the scenes of Tivoli. Molinaro felt it was a great opportunity to help support a local artist while creating a historical record of the town. "We know how carefully and amazingly he captures the scene," Molinaro said. "He's the official painter of the village—we just need a title for that."

After the four paintings originally commissioned are finished, the village has commissioned another series. "There are, thankfully, opportunities here for me, and I can stick around and give my thing back to my community," Griffith says. "After all, instead of a brain drain, there can be a culture drain, too, and all this culture can leave an area if it is not supported."

It would seem that the support has paid off for Griffith. His paintings are beautifully rendered, startlingly accurate depictions of the town and surrounding area. Oil paint richly colors the canvas and the quality of light Griffith captures immediately draws the viewer in close. He clearly is enamored with his subject and there's no missing the love he feels for his hometown.

"There's a thing about paintings where it's really a realization of creative life and time. I mean, there are 200 hours of my life represented by this object. And there's something in that composition that makes people stay with the painting because I stayed with it."

Joel Griffith's paintings are on permanent display in the Watts De Peyster Hall—which houses the administrative offices of the Village of Tivoli government and the Tivoli Free Library. There will be an opening reception on Sunday, May 16, 2-5PM. For more information, call (845) 757-2021. ●