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Oliver French Studio

A Working Gallery

by Wendy Johnson

I was on my way home when I saw a sign for an art studio I had never noticed. Being a believer in fate, I figured this was some sort of planned occurrence and so I clomped up the stairs toward the second floor "Oliver French Studio, A Working Gallery."

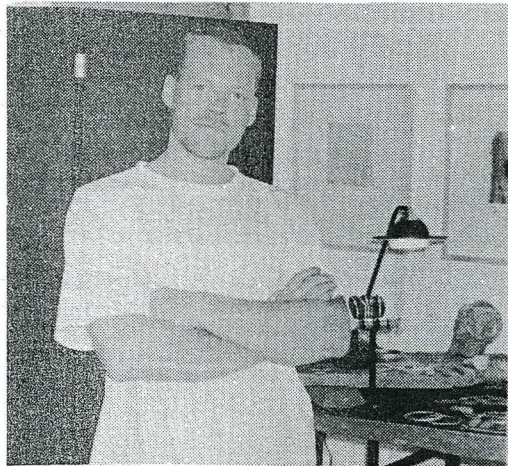
"What in the devil is a working gallery?" I wondered.

Upon entering the threshold, my somber ears were greeted by the tribal-like chanting of David Byrne's "The Forest." This soothing music had a relaxing effect and made me feel very welcome. The first thing which struck me about this place was the variety of art which French creates: etchings, sculptures, photographs, even hand-made display cases. Everything in the room was either made by him or carefully chosen to create a very distinct atmosphere, one which felt inviting and spiritual.

As my eyes scanned the room, I noticed the ink and oil etchings on three of the walls. Each one had the image of an angel etched into it, along with a graffiti-like message. Seemingly scribbled on one

was the question "will I ever have wings," while another one, unreadable until I got up close, read "I'm alone listening for angels."

The etchings were haunting and mysterious. Later, when I chatted with French, he told me that he uses the theme of angels because he believes he has a guardian angel and likes to pay tribute to that.



"I've been very fortunate," he explained, "I feel as if I've had angels to help and follow me through life."

Sounded like a happy enough theme--so why did the pictures themselves seem so sad and urgent?

"Well, there's quite a bit of emotion in areas where we can never have an answer," he said.

Ah, quite true. Take the L.A. riots, for example. It's hard to accept that sometimes justice is merely

an idea and not much more. At the time of the riots, French, a person from "all over the place," was living and working in L.A.

From the debris, he collected pieces of metal and sculpted between thirty-five and forty chairs. Each chair was sold out of Liz Blackman's Gallery on Melrose Avenue and a portion of the proceeds was donated to a homeless

health care benefit. From that very emotional work, all that is left is a series of black and white photographs which French took of the chairs. Nine of those pictures are hanging in his studio, along with an inscription proclaiming that "we all deserve a place to sit, a place to feel safe, a place where justice should

prevail."

"All of the chairs have kind of hard edges to them," he told me, "because I'm not sure anything too soft could come from [the riots]. The whole thing left everyone disturbed, and I guess the photographs, and the chairs themselves, have that quality."

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