

August 5 through October 22, 2017

Gas Stations, Laundromats, and the Spaces Between: paintings by **Mike Hartung** of Lindsborg, Kansas



Studio Roof Garden

I am one of those people who owe everything to their mother. She always encouraged me to draw and illustrate stories. I was an avid follower of the daily comic strips, and the best strips were in the late and lamented *Wichita Beacon*. I began to think about the possibility of a life drawing cartoons.

Money was tight, but Mom did get me a correspondence course from the Cartoonist's Exchange. My enthusiasm waned when my childish pencil efforts were returned with a perfected drawing done in red ink over the top of my effort. The kicker was the style of the red ink corrections were dated like something out of the 1930s, and even a dumb ass like me could tell it was hopelessly dated and nothing I would want to emulate.

I don't remember that much about my early life in Oklahoma. My parent's marriage was not a happy one, so I might have blocked it out. My mother had had enough by 1949, and she left with my sister Pat and me for Fredonia, Kansas. Fredonia was my Mother's home town, and there were relatives to put us up until she found work and rented us a place of our own.

Fredonia, Kansas, was the perfect place to grow up in the 1950s. It was the Wilson County seat and a thriving community with a commercial district on the four blocks surrounding the courthouse square. People would come to town on Saturdays to shop, visit, and prepare for the coming week. The school district was small and an art teacher was not hired until my senior year. Miss Sondra Walker was fresh out of Bethany College and arrived just in time to help me get ready for whatever was to come after high school.

A mystery scholarship was given to me at the end of my senior year. It provided enough extra that I could go to a four-year school, and I chose Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia, where I majored in art education. The school newspaper, the *Bulletin*, was quite happy to have a free weekly cartoon. Having to come up with a cartoon each week that was timely helped me develop a work ethic that carried over into the rest of my life.

As this narrative continues, the early Fredonia years are moving from windshield to rear-view mirror, and I don't want to leave without dwelling on two discoveries that made life bearable as I aged and raged against the boredom of small-town life: rock music and Sunday movie matinees.

I could have graduated in spring of 1966, but instead I walked away. I had decided I wasn't going to teach because most of my teachers no longer pursued art with the intensity or desire that I wanted to. In the summer of that year there was this big fist that snatched you up if you didn't have school or a job that provided a deferment. The war was out there and had been for a couple of years. I didn't really know what I thought about it. I remember I had read once (I think it was Hemingway) that every artist needs to fight in his/her generation's war. Back in Fredonia was the job that had sustained me through college. I had learned a lot about living from Dwight and Jolene Carley, and they couldn't have been any better to work for, but I didn't want to sell clothes the rest of my life. By August I was off for a physical (probably the worst day of my whole military career), and I was gone by October.

I have no war stories. I met some fine people in the military who were doing this job out of economic necessity. I spent my first year in Chicago and my second year in Vietnam. I still had no real convictions about the war—fear of my own skin was there but, in hindsight it all seems such a horrible waste and an early example of our government lying to us. I was a battery clerk in a self-propelled artillery unit. They issued me a .45 caliber pistol as my weapon, and I am proud to admit I never fired it in practice or in combat. I think being drafted was good for me, and it was good for the army. I'm sure the people I met probably would not have encountered someone like me, and that goes for me as well.

I was discharged from the army in October 1968, alive and undamaged and not a clue about what to do with my life. Bob Kerns, a friend I had grown up with in Fredonia, was teaching art in Emporia and suggested I go back to school. It was probably the best advice I've ever gotten and definitely the best advice I ever followed.

Two years without art and I came back with a higher skill set than what I left with. Richard Slimon, the painting teacher all the art students at Emporia State looked up to, was very supportive (I'm not sure of what he had thought about undergraduate me). I began to believe I could paint and began to think about getting an MFA degree and teaching college. I applied to several schools, but they were not overwhelmed by my abilities. I couldn't see how there would be enough art schools to accommodate all the MFAs being turned out into the work force. So I went home.

Away from the stimulus and assignments of school, I needed to see if I could paint. In Fredonia, I got a job at a bank printer and worked on the painting in the evening. Looking back, I had put it all together by the spring of 1970. There would be some missteps and mishaps along the way, but by 1970 I had the combination that would work the rest of my life.

I was in Fredonia for five years. I married, had a son (Willem, after de Kooning of course), and the last year returned to selling clothes, as bank printing was dying. My wife hated Fredonia, and after a visit to Lindsborg to meet up with old friends I had made at Emporia back in 1969, we both thought this could be the place.

The first was Don Osborn, a fine sculptor and one of the most giving people in the world of art, where it is usually every man for himself. Without his help and support we might have had to slide back to Fredonia. The first great thing he did was show me a studio that was up over Colonial Savings, and I rented it that day...before I had a house to live in or a job. A wise decision, since I'm still in that studio, and it has been forty-two years.

I must acknowledge how it all seemed to fall in place. My son got to have the same small-town childhood I had. Lindsborg was the perfect workplace, and I stumbled into Arrow Printing.

Kent and Terry Fellers, owners of Arrow Printing, were more than employers. Through the years they treated me with kindness, and I got to know all their kids as they were growing up. They currently share a grandson with me that has made the last three and a half years very special. This wasn't bank printing. It was everything up to and including four-color work. It was demanding, and you had to be precise; best of all it helped the painting. The skills required to do the job leaked back into the painting. I was focused and driven, and this worked for forty years, until my legs gave out, not from work but from smoking. Once I had what was working for me I became hard-core about not losing hold of what worked. My only desire was to paint.

The other significant person was the late Steve Scott, a very close friend for many years. I met him at the same time as Don Osborn back in Emporia in 1969. I could count on a weekly visit and tales about what was going on in Lindsborg. His input, be it criticism or anecdote, cannot be overlooked when looking back, and his place in Lindsborg's art community in the last half of the twentieth century is assured.

In the fall of 2013 I had a visit from an old friend, Laura Klocke. She'd come back for a funeral and wanted to come by and say hi. When she returned home she started planning an intervention and documentation of my work. She pulled in Richard, her husband, and Randy Just, a mutual friend. And it was established they would descend on November 12, 2014. I was, at that point, overwhelmed and more than a little embarrassed that three people would give up a week's vacation time to shoot, at best, the dicey output of an unknown painter.

By March of 2015 I was back to work with a new lease on life, my self-confidence restored, and a large part of my output documented. These three shows are the direct result of three very special people, Richard and Laura Klocke of Lawrence, Kansas, and Randy Just of Dallas, Texas. These shows are happening because of them.

Mike Hartung

June 2017

excerpted and edited from the preface of *Hartung*



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- MEMORIAL GALLERY -

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