

ASSEMBLING
THE LOCAL
AESTHETIC

Cultural Connections

Two local artists, who hail from other countries, tap into their rich roots for inspiration.

BY LARRY URISH

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

Most 4-year-olds would be punished for painting cartoons on their bedroom walls. But little Yuri Kuznetsov? He was actually praised for it.

“My mother taught art and she always encouraged me to use my imagination,” Kuznetsov says. “She ... told me Russian folk stories and I painted cartoons based on what I heard.” Some of his earliest efforts, long before starting art school at age 9, were based on his impressions of works by Russian poet, playwright and novelist Aleksandr Pushkin.

Born in Almeteyevsk, Russia, Kuznetsov recalls how the cans of brightly colored paint his mother made available to her students fueled his desire to express himself visually. “I especially remember the fall colors—all the reds, yellows and oranges.”

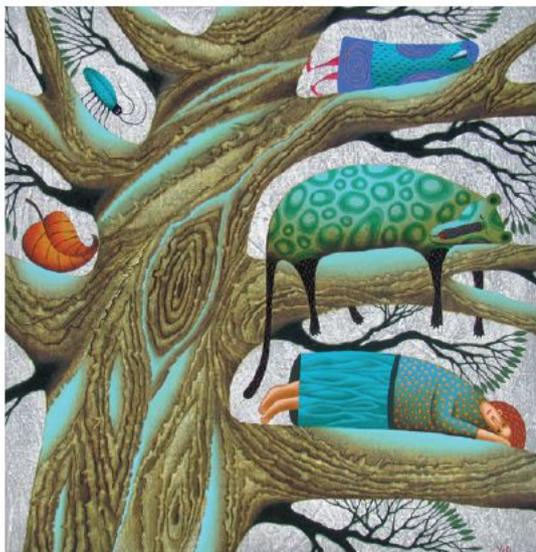
Vivid, dazzling hues are a trademark of Kuznetsov’s contemporary work, a collection of happy, offbeat images and whimsical scenarios that reflect and evoke the same childlike wonder that fueled his early imagination. Painted in acrylic and oil, his works have been showcased in both public and private collections throughout the world.



Kuznetsov first came to the U.S. in 1998 after winning an international art competition. After his allotted month teaching and demonstrating his technique at California State University, Northridge, he was invited to work and show at the now-defunct Elena Zass Gallery in Laguna Beach. Although he never returned to Russia, his homeland still finds its way into his paintings. “A lot of my work is influenced by Russian churches, cathedrals and Orthodox icons,” Kuznetsov says.

Close to home, the Laguna Niguel resident’s work has been shown at Laguna Art-A-Fair and Sawdust Art & Craft Festival as well as galleries throughout Laguna Beach and beyond. His most prominent public work, a 27-by-6-foot mural titled “Adventure,” is displayed on a wall downtown, depicting an odd collection of animals (and two happy humans) riding in a limousine. “It was supposed to remain there for two or three years,” he says. “They liked it so much, it’s been up for 18.”

When he’s not painting, Kuznetsov likes to travel, read and play his balalaika, a traditional, triangular-shaped Russian stringed instrument.



Top: artist Yuri Kuznetsov; bottom section, clockwise from left: “Resting”; “Good Neighbours”; “Such a Night”; his Laguna Beach mural, “Adventure”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF YURI KUZNETSOV. BLUE BOXES ON THIS SPREAD: ANI MANAKAL SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

SOUTH AFRICAN STYLE

Gavin Heath may have left South Africa more than 35 years ago, but his homeland remains firmly rooted in his DNA. A resident of the United States since 1985, he admits, “I’m still a South African after all these years. Africa is still in my blood.”

Heath had been working as a gym instructor and surfing competitively while studying sports medicine when he finally decided to flee from the apartheid-racked country, which he says was “in a state of emergency.” He moved all over—Israel, England, Belgium, Netherlands, France and Spain—before settling in Laguna Beach.

Heath first discovered glass art in 1987 and later honed his skills at the Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle. After returning to Laguna Beach, he began glass blowing African tribal dolls. “I really missed South Africa,” Heath says. “You can say I was homesick with a blowpipe. ... My nanny was from the Ndebele tribe [a South African ethnic group], and a lot of my inspiration comes from that.”

He eventually expanded his subject matter to include indigenous African wildlife and a wider range of people as well as ocean-themed works. Word of his talent spread, eventually reaching his homeland.

“One of my proudest moments was receiving a letter from Nelson Mandela, thanking me for my work. He’d seen some of my stuff and asked me to create a piece for him,” Heath explains. “... I also made ornaments for the Clintons’ White House Christmas tree, and that work



From left, Gavin Heath and his blown-glass work, “Giraffe Head,” “Baboon” and “Zebra”

was curated by the Smithsonian [Institution].”

Heath’s work has been exhibited in more than 80 galleries throughout the world. He has also appeared 30 times at Sawdust Art & Craft Festival—even serving as the event’s director for six years and its president for two—as well as Festival of Arts for 18 years.

His public artwork in Laguna Beach includes the Streamline bench on Ocean Avenue, which is embedded with glass waves and located in front of The Wharf restaurant, plus a paddleboard-shaped bench featuring glass “tide pools” at Heisler Park.

“Glass blowing is hard work,” Heath says. “I built my own equipment and make my own glass from sand—but I love it.”

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DYNAMIC DUO

Art and nature often go hand in hand, with pleasing florals, swaying palms and crashing ocean waves dotting paintings and drawings across the globe. Each November, Laguna Art Museum celebrates this connection with



A rendering of “Sunset Trace” at Main Beach Park

its aptly named Art & Nature festival, inspiring galleries around town to also display artwork inspired by natural beauty. This year, Los Angeles-based artist Patrick Shearn was commissioned to create a large-scale installation over Main Beach Park. “Sunset Trace,” a multicolored kinetic piece inspired by movement in nature, will be on display through Nov. 15. The annual initiative also featured a virtual lecture from the artist himself discussing the piece as well as a keynote speech from artist and designer Dan Goods of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory plus online events like a bookmaking workshop and virtual tours of the museum. A few of the galleries showcasing concurrent exhibits include The CAP Gallery and Forest & Ocean Gallery, the latter via the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association. (lagunaartmuseum.org) —Ashley Ryan

PAINTING & POETRY

Despite having to repeatedly postpone the release party, local artist Karen Petty published her book “Untamed Love & Wild Fruit” over the summer. The 82-page book of original material is filled with poetry and paintings on glossy paper, each accompanied by a QR code that takes you to Petty’s website.

To celebrate the release of her book, Petty is also offering a social media giveaway. Simply visit The Promenade on Forest and locate her painting, “Churning the Oceans of Milk,” then post a picture on Facebook or Instagram of yourself next to the piece with the hashtag #karenpettyanartistinlaguna. Petty will send each person that does so a free giclee of the mermaid-inspired artwork. Find her at Sawdust Art & Craft Festival’s outdoor marketplace on weekends through Nov. 15, and purchase the book there or via her website; it is expected to be available on Amazon soon as well. (karenpetty.com) —A.R.



Karen Petty at The Promenade on Forest with her painting, “Churning the Oceans of Milk”