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FREE

# Alive

## TALKING HEADS

*An interview with local artist  
Craig Carlisle*



**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS PART II**  
WHO YOU KNOW = WHAT YOU GET AS CONTRACT STEERING SCANDAL SPREADS



# Talking heads

by Kim Leddy

Inside an unassuming storefront in Grandview, with flowers growing on the sun-baked sidewalk and canvases blooming inside the large picture windows, there is an army of multi-colored heads just waiting to be discovered by unsuspecting passersby. This is the studio of local artist Craig Carlisle and it represents a unique opportunity for folks just to stop in and see what the artist is up to.

Rarely does the public get the chance to interact with artists on their home studio turf and Carlisle enjoys his accessibility. "There are a lot of kids and families in this neighborhood," he said, eyes bright. "They can walk by and see an artist working. The nature of this studio here is to be very visible to people. Before, I was in a warehouse on the fourth floor, painting in the dark, and here I have the ability to show my work all the time."

A laid-back, 30ish man with sandy hair and inquisitive blue eyes, the artist moves among his creations with ease, dressed in a t-shirt, drawstring shorts and Birkenstocks. Around him, hanging on or propped up against the walls, are examples of his vision—some finished, some in progress, some framed while others are just tacked up waiting to be doted on. The myriad paintings and drawings show off the subjects that have lured Carlisle's hand during his artistic tenure—gardens, a dog or two, highways of ladders and, of course, the heads.

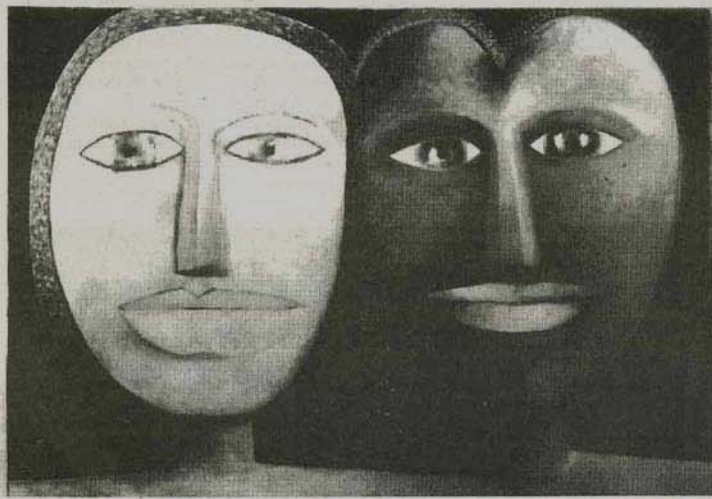
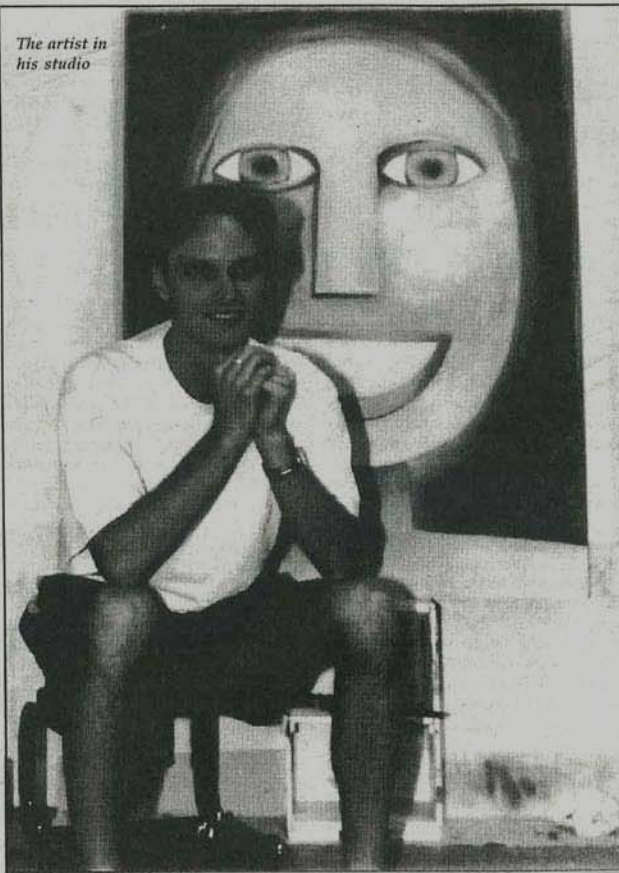
If you are scratching your own head and wondering if you have ever caught a glimpse of Carlisle's work, well you probably have, even if you didn't realize it at the time. That wonderful mural brightening the wall of Frank's Diner in the North Market is a Carlisle, as is the head on the floor of the Grand Vu in Grandview, of which the artist himself designed

the interior. The artist also designed the colorful First Night poster for this past year's celebration.

The Carlisle family moved to Grandview in 1976 from Oklahoma and although his family has since moved out west, the artist has chosen to locate his studio in the area where he spent his young years. Graduating from CCAD in 1988 with a fine arts degree in painting, Carlisle sees himself as a "Columbus artist." "I can see my art expanding from here," he noted. "Although the galleries in Columbus have not embraced the heads, the community has."

And Carlisle likes it that way. He has always sold his work directly from his studio, rather than going through a representative. "The intimacy begins with people coming to my studio," he explained. "It is part of the process, of coming into contact with people. Here, I can show them a picture I did in the second grade. This way, I know where my babies are going." The artist has studied art therapy as well and is aware of how paintings and art can affect the mood of his

The artist in his studio



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clients. "I like watching how a client reacts to colors, or to wood, canvas or metal," he said.

"It is so much fun to interact with the client. I bring the work into their homes and they just light up. The energy of the painting is added to the energy of the house. For anyone to pick up something they react to, there is a reason that happens."

Originally, Carlisle had been studying advertising at CCAD, but moved over onto the painting road and has been walking that aesthetic mile ever since. After spending several years in several locales working in framing shops and galleries, Carlisle realized he had to "take that jump."

"Two years ago I

decided to take that big leap from the 9-to-5 stuff to doing my art full-time," he recalled. "That's what it takes, just taking that big leap to get out of that frame of mind of relying on another job. I have been lucky enough to be doing this ever since."

In addition to the work he creates in his studio, Carlisle also takes on many commissions, like the aforementioned works beautifying Frank's Diner and Grand Vu. "The first one I did was probably four years ago for a CEO of GE that had retired and moved into Columbus," he recalled. "It was for a 35-foot floral ceiling mural in the entry way. That was really scary, not just because of the height and the intensity of the size, but I had never really taken the risk of putting myself out into the art arena. I almost walked away from the project, but I am glad I didn't. I really faced my fears."

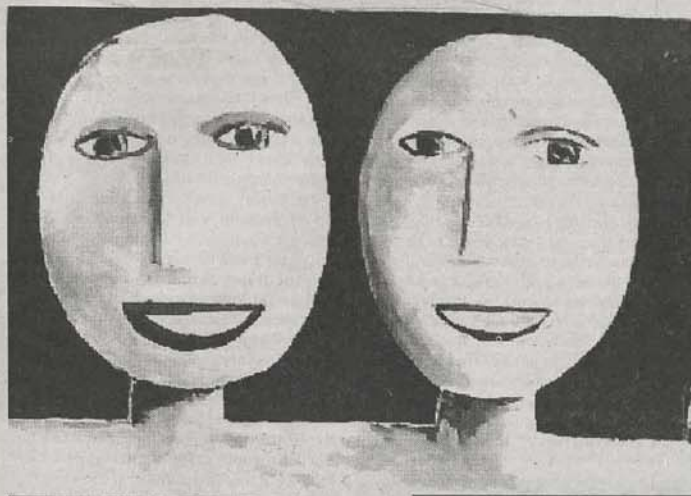
Carlisle's modus operandi is to work on series. There was the ladder works from a few years back and then the floral series. "Once you tap into something, you want to work with it and develop the style, but what happens is it eventually comes back around and the works begin to feel alike and look alike," he explained. "Around 1993, I had burnt myself out on the florals. I couldn't keep up with the sales and I was fried. I felt like dropping out and not making my artwork anymore but, of course, being an artist you can't just do that."

"The head paintings were an old idea that I never explored because I was so keyed in on sales—on selling the work and surviving. I mean, who would buy a big head painting? But, I thought, I'm thinking about quitting anyway so I have nothing to lose, I might as well make 'em."

So Carlisle started creating the heads. Big heads, small heads, smiling heads and shaded heads. Each work has its own personality, from the emotive value of the color choices to the expression on the faces. Within a year of his decision to create this latest series, Carlisle had a studio filled to the brim with his new endeavor. "There were huge head paint-







Due to Carlisle's single-minded mission, it falls upon his own paint-splattered shoulders to get the message out regarding his work. Half-artist, half-marketing genius, he has been successful in this endeavor for a variety of reasons. "It takes time to network, to come up with marketing strategies," he admitted. "I've placed the head paintings in a lot of key spots in the city. There are a lot of my paintings in real strong collections around the city, as well as the public art—Frank's for example."

Carlisle is philosophical about his lone journey.

cause of the feedback I get. People put them in prominent places. Every piece of art has that energy, that is why art exists. I will always make paintings that are strong with emotional intensity, and are created in an optimistic fashion. I am delivering something positive back into the world." The son of a preacher, Carlisle is intimately aware of the need to spread positive vibes.

Perhaps because of his focus on the bright side of life, the artist doesn't add his persona to the whole "suffering artist" hype machine. "I think the stigma that goes with artists as being somewhat depressed or hanging out in a dark place, some of that is really true," he said. "But I can't make art in that environment. It's about light and people, the smiles on the faces of the heads, the colors on the petals of the flowers. That is so important and that is not really reinforced among artists—being happy."

For Carlisle, if an artist is working within a dark space, either literally or in his or her own mind, then the work is bound to reflect that weighty energy.

"Why am I doing this? I'm spending my lifework, I'm not a doctor, a lawyer, or a minister—I make big head paintings. Whatever!" he laughed. "Those are big questions, but that is where it gets back to the message. There is a certain message with the heads. People feel better, their energy changes, the energy of their environment changes when their head arrives. There is a certain feeling—they serve a real purpose and when they stop serving that purpose, I'll stop making them. And that is not based on sales at all, that is not the spiritual side of the heads. The spiritual side of the heads in their positive, spiritual and communicative energy. Wherever the message is coming from, it needs to be delivered. It goes through me and comes out of my fingers onto the canvas."

Craig Carlisle's studio and showroom is located at 1632 W. First Avenue in Grandview. To schedule an appointment, call 486-8115.

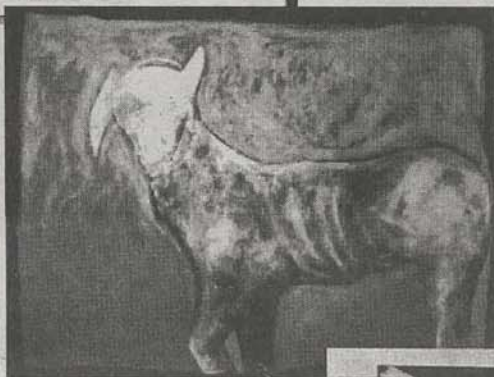
ings everywhere; it was awesome," he recalled. "I started bringing people to the studio and they got excited about the pieces."

Taking a slightly different approach to the usual means of getting work to the masses, he decided to hire event planners and throw a party. Carlisle hired The Eventors to coordinate an open house. "We did everything that a normal gallery wouldn't do," he laughed. "We had the event in the morning, from 7-9 a.m. on a Friday in the summer of '94. It was a huge success; we had a great turnout. I sold 12 out of 30 works in that short period of time. After that, I felt fueled and reinforced, and the series has really taken off for me."

The heads currently hanging in Carlisle's studio reflect the subtle and not-so-subtle differences that can be found among the inanimate population. There are double-heads sprouting from the same set of shoulders as well as single heads; paintings are awash with pale pastel colors or a spectrum of vibrant blues and purples. The latest head painting incorporates a collage aspect—bits and pieces of catalogues, magazines and other printed matter are embedded in the layers of paint. "Some of those pieces are from a Chadwick catalogue—you don't have to throw anything away," he said. "I'm recycling junk mail."

Looking at the works can be, according to Carlisle, "real intellectual or I can walk by and simply enjoy it."

"There is always a lot to play with in each painting, but I usually don't recognize it at first because I just sit down and paint," he said. "It [the image] is simple, yet it draws on the emotions of the viewer; each work has a different relationship with the viewer. A two year old took home a head and actually plays with it. It was a small one on metal and it's probably all scratched up, but that's okay because that what it's about—the relationship between my soul and the viewer's; that's where the message comes from."



"Obviously, my path is one of self-promotion and marketing and learning what the galleries do," he said. "I take clients out to dinner every night. It is so important to be visible, to meet people."

Additionally, the artist offers his work at prices that would work for any size pocketbook, from \$50 upwards. Carlisle even offers a payment plan for those who yearn for a painting, but can't part with a chunk of money at one moment. "It's not about making the biggest and best for me," he said. "It's about communicating. The other day a one year old bought a painting. Obviously the mother helped out, but the baby came in and related to one."

He also puts his clients to work for him, in a way. If one client turns someone else onto Carlisle's work, the original client will get a break on the next painting he or she buys.

"The deal with my work," he concluded, "is that it is about communication, about communicating something optimistic. I know that the heads have a healing aspect to them be-

