

APRIL 2006

 Free! Free!

SHORT NORTH GAZETTE

News of the Short North, Surrounding Neighborhoods, and the Columbus Art Community

Carlisle's Creatures

California Artist Craig Carlisle
Returns To Columbus
For His 10th Anniversary Show

Story by
Jennifer Hambrick
p.18



California artist Craig Carlisle returns to Columbus for his 10th Anniversary show

Story by Jennifer Hambrick

Craig Carlisle lives in a world of Big Heads, Teddy Birds and Pink Monsters, a world where pink clouds dot blue skies and flowers spring up in gardens of riotous color.

He lives in this world because, as an artist, he created it.

Carlisle's world comes to Columbus this month in a solo show of his paintings from 2006 at the Short North's Sharon Weiss Gallery. His work is known for its brilliant color palette and its childlike representation of fantastic, storybook-like characters that at once invoke and question the naive innocence of childhood.

"I think it's whimsical and sophisticated figurative painting," said George Billis, owner of George Billis Galleries in New York City and Los Angeles, where Carlisle is represented. "I like the way he uses color and he has quite an imagination."

Carlisle first established his name in Columbus in the 1990s with his gigantic colorful paintings of primitive-looking heads. The Big Head paintings set forth an immediately identifiable and marketable style.



Sharon Weiss, owner of the Sharon Weiss Gallery and a collector of work by Ohio artists, says Carlisle's Big Head paintings first attracted her to his work. The humanity of these paintings is what appeals to Weiss, who bought two for her personal collection in the 1990s.

"His Big Head paintings always have a personal look," Weiss said. "You can look in their eyes and they have feeling."

Since the early 1990s, Carlisle has exhibited his work in solo and group shows in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, St. Louis and Detroit, and has been the feature of several interviews for print media and cable television. The unique characters and bold color palette that have come to define the Columbus-trained Carlisle's popular style are on the verge of becoming even more widely recognized in the commercial market.

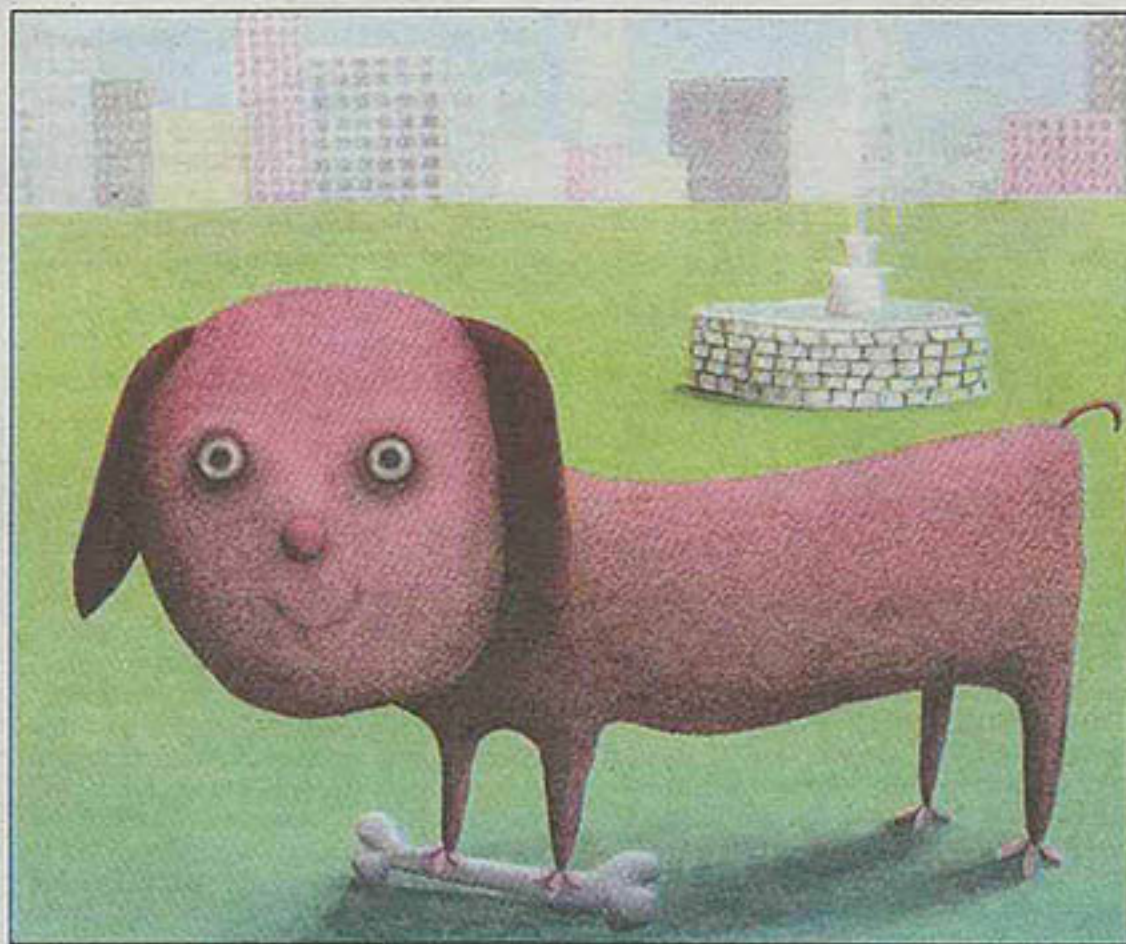
Characters and Childhood

A native of Oklahoma, Carlisle moved to Columbus with his family as a middle school student in the late 1970s. Midway through his studies in the design program at the Columbus College of Art and Design, and after working several summers at the now-defunct Nimbus Gallery in Dallas, Texas, he changed his focus from design to fine art painting.

"I was working in some galleries for summer jobs and was getting a chance to meet artists who were having professional careers. I could see that you can make a living as a painter," Carlisle said.

Carlisle stayed in Columbus after graduating from CCAD in 1988 and worked to establish himself in the local art scene. By the mid-1990s, Carlisle's name was known in Short North gallery circles. It was at a show of Carlisle's "Little Heads on Metal" in July 1995 at the Short North coffee shop The Coffee Table that Sharon Weiss acquired her first Craig Carlisle paintings.

"I had heard the name Craig Carlisle when I had my shop on Poplar here in the Short North," Weiss said. "My father,



Mr. Wiggles

another Columbus artist Eric Lubkeman and I were talking and chatting in my gallery on Poplar when someone came in and said they had just been to The Coffee Table and Craig Carlisle had just hung works there. I said, 'We're going over to The Coffee Table right now.' (The works) were little heads painted on tin, mounted on wood with a little nail in each corner. We went crazy. I bought two and I contacted (Carlisle) and it's been a wonderful relationship ever since."

Carlisle moved to New York City in August 1997 to make business contacts in the New York art world. There he met George Billis who, a few years later, would list him on his roster of up-and-coming young artists.

But the natural beauty of California and the allure of the California lifestyle had always appealed to Carlisle. In October 1998, he packed his bags and headed to San Francisco.

"I moved to San Francisco because I always wanted to be in California," Carlisle said. "I went to New York City to make business contacts, to get some life experience in New York as an artist. I did that for (almost) a couple years and at that point I realized that what I wanted to do was be in California."

Carlisle's circumstances in San Francisco forced him to rent a smaller studio, which resulted in smaller paintings. Works like the ten-foot Big Head he once painted on the back of a friend's truck became a thing of the past.

Now, Carlisle has called Los Angeles home for almost four years. He moved to

the southern California city to take advantage of the greater opportunities there to develop his presence in the commercial market.

"The culture, the opportunities with art, specifically with fine art in Los Angeles are really good," Carlisle said. "And also the direction I want to start going into is more commercial, not just fine art."

Though Carlisle continues to paint heads, albeit smaller ones, an ever-expanding cast of whimsical, animalesque characters also populates his work of recent years.

"One of the things I do really well is make really cute characters," Carlisle said.

Many of his paintings since 2003 feature the Teddy Bird, a potbellied, cone-nosed hybrid of teddy bear and bird. In Carlisle's paintings, Teddy Birds float blimp-like through pink-clouded skies or, as in *Queen of the Hollywood Hills* (2006), perch peacefully upon a mammoth holly bush that dwarfs the city skyscrapers around it.

A button-nosed dachshund named Mr. Wiggles has more recently made its way into Carlisle's work. *Mr. Wiggles With the Blue Flowers* (2006), on display at the Sharon Weiss Gallery this month, depicts the dog sitting up on his hind legs in a cluster of periwinkle-blue flowers beneath a sky with pink clouds. A thin line curved upward in a smile conveys a sense of happiness untainted by adult realities.

Carlisle's characters conjure a sense of longing for the simplicity of youth. But lurking beneath his portrayal of childhood innocence is the darker side of childhood,

the side that calls to mind the grotesque fantasies of the Brothers Grimm and the euphemistic allegories of old English nursery rhymes.

In *The Gardener* (2005), the eyes of an endearing bald-headed humanoid figure peer over the tops of brightly colored flowers so numerous that they conceal the lower half of the figure's face. A blue sky is the backdrop of what could be a spring day. In *The Witness* (2002), the same character is half hidden beneath the murky waters of a night-darkened pond.

Carlisle sees flower gardens as a naive escape from the real world. And although he is aware of the darker aspect of some of his work, particularly *The Witness*, he says he doesn't aim for the sinister.

"(*The Witness*) is one of the more ominous paintings I think I've ever done," Carlisle said. "It's haunting in a way, but it evokes emotion. It was not meant to be intimidating or scary; it was more thought-provoking. The question I wanted to raise was, Did he just see something happen? Is he hiding?"

Carlisle's representation of childhood as at once bucolic and terrifying makes his paintings rich subjects for interpretation. He knows this, too, and says he is always intrigued by how others respond to his work.

"There are some people who really like to go deep into psychology with my work and I love that," Carlisle said. "And there are other people who want a more simple statement. They can look at a Teddy Bird and just smile. Everybody responds differently. To me that means it's good. It has purpose beyond just another painting on the wall."

Carlisle seems not just to enjoy varying interpretations of his work, but even to encourage them.

"When I bought my first Craig Carlisle, Craig ended up delivering it to me in person," said Eric Lubkeman. "He and I sat



Teddy Bird

on the porch and talked for a couple of hours and there was a lot more to the painting than I initially thought. It was a head with horns, this devil kind of image, I told him. And he said, 'Well, who said it was a devil? It could be a centaur. It could be something else.' He put all kinds of ideas in my head. I think it's great when an artist does that."

"I think lots of people read different things into his art and it just depends which image people relate to," said George Billis. "He's able to create a link between his art and the client."

Carlisle himself is sometimes surprised by how his work affects him emotionally.

Fire In the Cardboard City (2006) shows a flat perspectiveless jumble of pastel skyscrapers – the Cardboard City – with black smoke billowing out of one of the buildings against a crystal blue sky. As Carlisle painted *Fire In the Cardboard City*, he was taken by surprise when his creative process turned destructive.

"I found that painting haunting," Carlisle said. "It frightened me a little bit. I set fire to one of my own buildings. I was too deep into it; I couldn't stop the fire. The psychology of that is, it's a cardboard city and the fire's going to go up pretty fast. I did that painting after the breakup with my girlfriend. That was the first painting I did after we broke up. It was a very hard time for me."

It's not too difficult to perceive a connection between *Fire In the Cardboard City* – with its claustrophobic skyline belching fiery smoke into the sky above – and the New York City terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The attacks inspired Carlisle to create his Pink Monsters, furry-textured creatures of Carlisle's "color of passion" that exist to spread love in the world. And as though the very hand of scripture itself, Carlisle gave the Pink Monsters their own creation myth in a story he wrote for the March 2002 *Short North Gazette*:

"On one warm late summer day," wrote Carlisle, "the skies were clear from air traffic. The sun took full advantage and fed the earth with light. The birds flew through the sky freely for what remained of that day. Their wings dominated the air once again as nature had intended. Each bird carried a pink seed in its beak and dropped it to the earth at random. A gentle breeze that day helped spread the seeds."

"On that warm late summer day a tragedy had occurred on earth and humans gathered together collectively shedding tears which fed the pink seeds. By mid-afternoon the pink seeds sprouted and rose from the earth. The stems became furry arms and legs in no time at all. Furry heads appeared next and then the bodies broke free from the ground. The Pink Monsters were born, emerging as carriers of love."

Just as there are good witches and bad witches in *The Wizard of Oz*, in Carlisle's world there are good and bad monsters. Pink Monsters, according to Carlisle himself, are good monsters. Unlike clowns, who often convey a sinister angst despite their happy exteriors, Pink Monsters have no dark side.

The pure decency of the Pink Monsters is one example of a willful optimism that Carlisle says finds its way into his artwork in response to life's challenges. His Teddy Birds and even the new Mr. Wiggles, whose single-lined, semicircular grins suggest unalloyed contentment, bear the mark of Carlisle's groping for goodness in an increasingly cynical world.

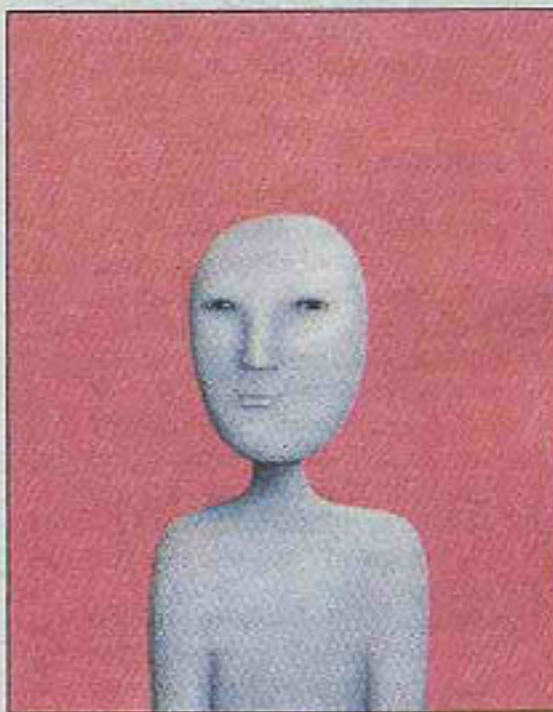
"I think my work over the last two years has become more optimistic and maybe somewhat forced in playfulness," Carlisle said. "A lot of my paintings have the smiley face. It's a very simple line, there's no full lip, no teeth. I look at it as a kind of plastered-on smile. I live in a really big city where there are a lot of plastic smiles. People walk around with this stitched-on smile. You really can't see what's going on inside because you get this facade. I think that's what's happened

to me personally since I left Columbus. There are a lot of stitched-on smiles – all the Teddy Birds have the same line smile. I think that's a response to world affairs. You become a little more tight and not as trusting."

Some may argue that forced optimism is better than no optimism at all, and certainly better than nihilistic pessimism. This is where Carlisle's view on the healing power of art finds its most powerful expression. According to Carlisle, who likens his own creative process to meditation and channeling, certain of his paintings have a curative affect on certain people. In the same way that people find "soul mates," people and paintings can find each other in unique relationships. Carlisle described this vision in a 1997 story, entitled "Healing Heads," for the *Short North Gazette*:

"Mysterious healing powers permeate every Head painting," Carlisle wrote. "This was a message channeled to me through (a large early painting) Big Guardian Angel Head several months ago."

Little Boy in a Big Scary World



Flower Garden



ART • ANTIQUES • ACCESSORIES

Sharon Weiss Gallery

Sharon Weiss – Owner, consultant

20 East Lincoln Street
In the Short North

614.291.5683 or 614.451.8165

Thursday and Friday Noon to 4pm

Saturday Noon to 5pm • Sunday 1pm to 4pm

(formerly Antiques & Art on Poplar)

Carlisle cont.

"It was also told to me by this majestic painting that each Head would contain a strong message, only to be revealed by those in need.

"There were claims of serenity and happiness among those who spent time with their Head paintings. I understand and would like to continue the examination of meditating with Head paintings."

For Carlisle himself, the process of creating a work is a healing process, as is letting it go to heal others in the world.

"It's not for me to know who it will heal, how it will heal," Carlisle said. "I know it starts with me. Some people ask me, 'How can you let go of your painting?' I get to experience it first. In the process of painting it, that's where I get to heal. It can be simply that it made me feel good that day. And I get the gift of turning it around and passing it on to somebody else. What I've found is that most everybody I've witnessed take one of my paintings walks away with a smile on their face. I have collectors who have large collections of my paintings and they come back every year and buy more. There's a collector in Columbus who bought a lot of my older Big Head paintings. He still says walking downstairs in the morning and seeing that big head painting makes him feel good."

Craft and Color

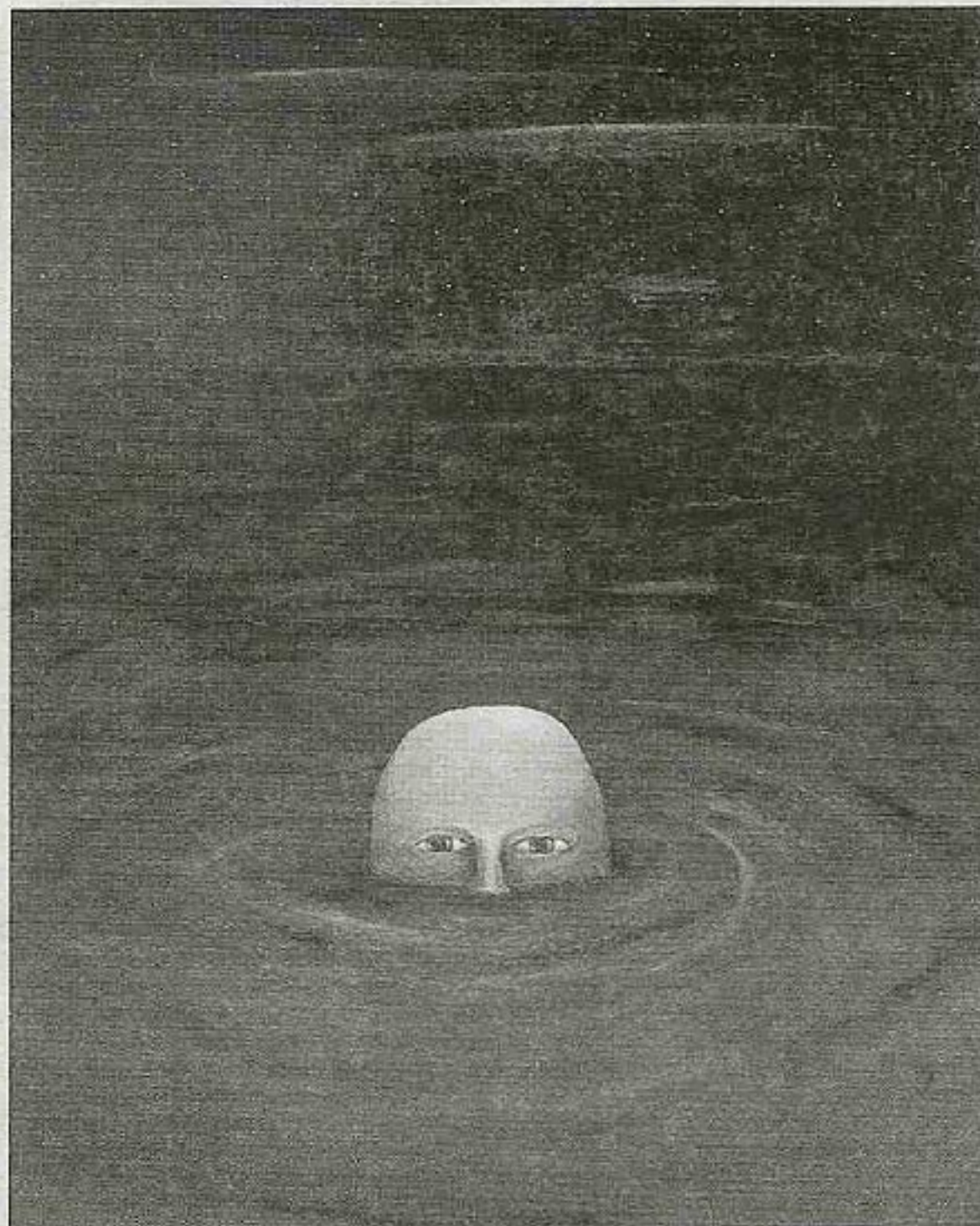
The feel-good quality of Carlisle's characters comes as much from the colors that give them emotional depth as from their primitive, unburdened two-dimensionality. That's in part what drove New York and Los Angeles gallery owner George Billis to represent Carlisle.

Carlisle's use of color also in part first attracted Sharon Weiss to support his work again and again. Weiss sees his bold color palette and the integrity of other technical aspects of his work as signatures of the Carlisle style.

"I think one of the most exciting things about his work that I love is the color," Weiss said. "I still think he is the best colorist of any Columbus artist. You can tell it's a Craig Carlisle piece because of the painstaking time he takes in the color, in the texture. I love his work."

Carlisle probed his reliance on color in creating some of his paintings for this month's show. Among the works at the Sharon Weiss Gallery are a series of black-and-white paintings similar to Carlisle's *Neutral Boy* (2005), in which a totemesque grayscale figure (perhaps a cousin of the Big Heads) gazes outwardly against a black background. In these paintings Carlisle challenged himself to use aspects of his technique other than color for expressive effect.

"My figures have been pretty colorful and bright," Carlisle said, "but I'm doing black-and-white paintings right now. I don't know why, but I know it's very deliberate. I like it, I like the look, I like black-and-white photography, so maybe



The Witness

that's some of the inspiration. In the show itself, there'll be a beautiful contrast between the beautiful, bright, playful paintings I've done with the dogs, and the figures. I'm really good with color. I can throw color at a painting and make people feel really good, but can I do that with black and white? It's almost like giving the audience a coloring book and having them fill it in themselves, with their eyes."

Concern and Commerce

Carlisle's thoughtful interest in how his art affects people is just another expression of his concern for beings everywhere. Sharon Weiss was captured by a peacefulness in his work that she says is an extension of his personality.

"I thought his paintings were peaceful and happy and when I met him I thought he was a kind soul," Weiss said. "That kindness reflects in his paintings."

This kindness may be at the heart of Carlisle's knack for fostering his relation-

ships with other artists. Taking its place with the two Craig Carlisle paintings in Eric Lubkeman's private collection is a hand-painted condolence card he received from Carlisle on his mother's death.

This may be the healing power of art at work: breaking through the "stitched-on smile," reaching out to the world to try to heal the wound of alienation one painting at a time.

Though the world of Carlisle's characters – with its ineffable darkness lurking

beneath an unsuspecting surface and the painted-on grins of its citizens – to some extent resembles our world, it categorically rejects the disconnectedness of people today. Carlisle, who says all of his characters are "friends," would have it no other way.

In an effort to spread his characters' gospel of interconnectedness and hope, Carlisle is working to develop his creatures for the broader commercial market. He recently registered a trademark for the Teddy Bird and is working with design consultants and investors to develop it into a recognizable children's character. Like the Hello Kitty character and brand, Carlisle plans to develop the Teddy Bird's visibility over time, instead of offering it up to the highest bidder.

"There's a character, there's a name that goes with it, there's an expression, there's a feel. I don't want to flood and trash the world with the Teddy Bird," Carlisle said. "How it usually works is, a major animation company designs something on site and floods it onto the market and all the fast-food chains pick it up and put it on their cup. Hello Kitty is not on Burger King cups because they don't have to be. They started 20 or 25 years ago and developed very slowly. If it starts out slow with integrity then something good can come of it. I don't want to sell away the trademark to a big company. As long as I'm in the mix and have control over it, it will have integrity. I would love to look back someday and have something influence other kids like Curious George influenced me. I want to bring joy into children's lives."

To this end, Carlisle also has been trying to write a children's book with the Teddy Bird as the central character. He has penned a number of storylines but has yet to find the one that will frame the Teddy Bird character in the most meaningful light.

Still, as with his paintings, all of which Carlisle says are autobiographical in some way, Carlisle sees something of himself in his Teddy Bird storylines.

"Each storyline I've done, it's been the Teddy Bird's a hero. It's like my life story, actually," Carlisle said. "He's going out somewhat naive and exploring the world. The Pink Monsters show up and the Teddy Bird lives in the Cardboard City and he likes to go to the field of flowers to play."

Craig Carlisle's 10th Anniversary exhibit at Sharon Weiss Gallery runs through the month of April. An opening reception will be held on March 31, 2006, from 6-9 pm with Craig Carlisle in attendance. The event is open to the public. Sharon Weiss Gallery is located at 20 E. Lincoln St. in the Short North. Hours are Noon to 4pm on Thursday and Friday, Noon to 5pm on Saturday, and 1 to 4pm on Sunday. Call 614-291-5683 or 614-451-8165 for more information.