



Photos by Jerry McCreo

Art in the ring

By PATRICIA C. TURNER

When most people learn that an artist works in pastels, they conjure up a particular mental picture of that person.

Alex Piccirillo of Nutley, who has received the designation "master pastelist" from his artist colleagues, probably does not match that image.

Nor are his pastels "pastel."

Piccirillo has a tattoo, and favors blue jeans and T-shirts without sleeves. He's never without a cigarette.

One of his large self-portraits, almost life-size, shows him as a championship boxer, in one mock newspaper front page picture winning the title in the ring, in a smaller inset, his face bruised and swollen over the words "life filled to the brim."

Another very telling self-portrait shows Piccirillo in his characteristic jeans and T-shirt, a bottle of beer and a pack of cigarettes on the table where his art materials wait, working on one of his paintings.

In that picture, a stuffed mail carrier's shirt is nailed to an easel. The artist is holding broken rose-colored glasses.

Piccirillo has worked as a mail carrier in Nutley for 17 years, and it helps pay the bills for this suburban family—wife Phylis, daughters Alexandra, 13, and Christine, 9—an above-ground pool and some tomato plants in the backyard.

Clearly, though, Piccirillo loves his art.

Growing up in Brooklyn, he can't remember a time he wasn't drawing and painting. "I would take a lot of rides on the trains and ferries, filling up sketch books."

During high school, Piccirillo received a scholarship to study at the Brooklyn Museum of Art art school. He then attended the School of Visual Arts in New York.

In this period of his life, Piccirillo spent much time in boxing gyms, never seriously boxing himself, but training with some very serious boxers.

Boxing scenes are still important to his work.

He is also concentrating on the parks in Nutley, both landscapes and pictures with people, especially a favorite painting of an impromptu saxophone concert he found by following the sound and some major work on bocce players.

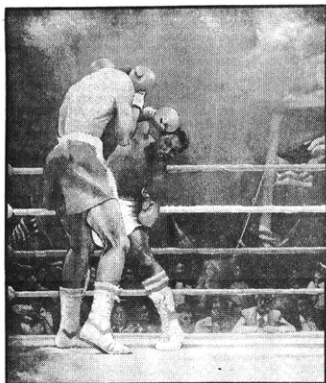
Piccirillo does not take photographs, instead capturing what he needs in sketch pads and in water color studies.

He can't estimate how many trips he has made to stand and draw the bocce players.

He also sketches motorcycle clubs and go-go bars, with carefully obtained permission.

"I don't like to skim the surface," Piccirillo said. "I like to get the art under my fingernails."

Piccirillo achieves the texture so evident in his work by covering his canvases with a mixture of ground



pumice stone and acrylic gesso and water, creating an almost sandpaper surface, then washing that with umber, gray or green.

His wife, Phylis, is often the model for his paintings, and Piccirillo frequently uses a mirror in making self-portraits.

With a preference for work from the Ash Can School, the artist said, "I learned most of my stuff from abstract paintings."

Further, "I'm kind of a purist. I'm really interested in people, the nitty gritty, having a personal vision. It's not a pretty picture any more."

In addition to holding his full-time job, Piccirillo teaches at the Yard School of Art in Montclair and has taught for the National Arts Club and the Pastel Society.

"I enjoy teaching. You have to think, and the students give me feedback."

He has also taught aesthetics to academically talented students at Nutley High School and gives private studio instruction.

Piccirillo's paintings can be seen at the Wyckoff Gallery in Wyckoff.

His pieces have also been shown in the Essex Arts Council Annual show, the Bergen Museum, the Off-Broadway Gallery and Lever House in New York, and the Salmagundi 12th Annual Non-Member Show in New York.

He has received the Degas Society Award of Excellence, and was elected to full membership in that group in 1988. He was awarded "Best in Show" in 1989 in the New Jersey American Artist Professional League.

Piccirillo was elected a full member of the Art Centre of New Jersey that same year.

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From top, Alex Piccirillo sketching a self-portrait in his Nutley home studio, one of his works depicting boxers in combat and a self-portrait titled 'The Effigy'