



**Kerry Joe Kelly at the entrance to the Rithet Building beside a stained glass work, for which he is renowned.**

**Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist, Times Colonist**

Kerry Joe Kelly is back! Those with long memories know that Kelly was one of the defining artists of the 1970s in Victoria. His surrealist paintings and drawings hang on many walls, but his creative stained glass remains his legacy.

The extensive installation within the Rithet Building on Wharf Street and a dramatic circular piece at Swan's Pub continue to inspire.

Kelly and his wife, musician Diane Kelly, have made their home in Portugal for many years but return to Victoria frequently. Those who remember him as the original artist in Chinatown, and a habitué of the Churchill Pub, may be surprised to learn he has made a substantial career creating glass installations for churches in Portugal.

I caught up with Kelly at his home in Esquimalt.

"I was born in Victoria," he said. His great-great-great-uncle was apparently "the first white man born in Fort Victoria," and he referred me to the Provincial Archives to read *The Memoirs of Long Gun Jack*, his great-great-grandfather. "Cordova Bay, that's where they all eventually hung out," he said, "two doors south of McMorran's."

Kelly started out at Bank Street Elementary School ("now an art school," he chuckles) and Margaret Jenkins School, progressing through Oak Bay Junior High and Victoria High School. He liked to paint and draw, but didn't get much encouragement.

"In Grade 7," he recalled, "I got to choose one of my options. Finally, an art class! - I went in all excited and spent the next six months with a little ball of clay making an ashtray. I was so disappointed," he said. "I never walked into an art class again."

On graduation from high school he was advised to study chemical engineering and went to work for Imperial Oil in Sarnia, Ont., where he spent three years on ethylene plant construction. "After work I'd wander down the end of Lake Huron, watching all the fish floating belly-up. I couldn't stand it. It was such a negative input. I got on my motorcycle and came back to Victoria." It was 1969. "I picked up my painting brushes and that was that.

"I didn't have much experience with the world of galleries," he continued. People would ask him "what artists do you like?" and he said, "to be honest, I didn't know anybody. I didn't have any interest in any other artist except myself."

Just like almost everyone in those days, he hung out in the Churchill Hotel, where he met artist Jack Kidder, who lived in a big house on MacGregor Street. Kidder became a life-long friend, and the influence of his partner, George Forbes, was seminal.

Forbes realized that Kelly didn't understand the implications of the surrealistic sketches he was making. "We strolled around my exhibition and he sort of psychoanalyzed me, showed me for the first time how my subconscious mind worked. I didn't know I was so deep, and my drawings became much more interesting, even to me."

In the early '70s, Sam Bawlf, city councillor and developer, owned a building at the lower end of Fisgard Street, and Kelly, with Laird Campbell, moved in, to become the first artists living in Chinatown. The precocious Kelly had shows at Vancouver's Bau Xi Gallery and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1975.

And he had discovered glass work - cutting up anything made of glass and soldering it together with lead came. In 1975, under an NDP regime, government buildings allocated one per cent of the construction budget for art. Thanks to arts commissioner Jack Wilkinson, Kelly got a major commission for 25 glass panels in the Rithet Building. "That was a bright moment," he recalled. "They commissioned a lot of really nice work and set up the Provincial Art Collection." With a change of government, much of the artwork went into hiding, never to be seen again, though Kelly's glass remains in place.

Not so the stunning and huge glass wall Kelly installed in Expo 86's Folk Life Pavilion in Vancouver. The building was destined to be permanent, but after Expo it was sold to a developer and demolished. Not one to look back, Kelly was by then establishing an international career from his base in Portugal.

Together we leafed through volumes of his photos showing churches, seniors residences, office towers and private homes around the world.

Most impressive is a screen in the entrance for the new basilica at Fatima, Portugal, a major Catholic pilgrimage site. A photo shows "a couple of million people" attending the opening and the dramatic new basilica that seats 9,000.

Kelly's work is 37 metres across and four metres tall. Words of the Bible in 27 languages were screened on the glass in enamel and then fused in a furnace. As every Roman Catholic order in the world has an office or chapel at Fatima, Kelly has been kept busy there with many other commissions.

He'll be back at work in Portugal next month. But now he's filling his studio with drawings on sheets of paper given to him by Herbert Siebner's heirs. On them he is inscribing his wife's poetry from her recent performance, Love and Landmines, which debuted at the recent opening of the new Community Arts Council Gallery at Cedar Hill.

And he's enjoying the company of old friends.

Kerry Joe Kelly's back!

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