

Finding Center

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN



KATIE SOX

Ian Factor's connection to Bridgton extends back to his childhood. His family has a vacation home on Highland Lake where he spent summers in the lake and winter weekends on the slopes of Shawnee Peak. For the school year he was at home in Boston, where he recalls a cursive writing lesson during which he embellished the alphabet with imaginary battle scenes. When the teacher saw what he was doing and took his paper to show to the rest of the class, he was mortified. When she made a point of saving it in a folder with his name on it for future reference he was even more so. Until she told him she was doing so because it was special; that he had created something exceptional. He credits that grade school teacher with recognizing and validating what he had done on a personal level, but also for showing him that it was important to other people because it communicated something to them.

"I've always been more interested in the narrative aspect of image making. It's not just a sense of self-expression—and I teach this to my students—there's a responsibility as an artist, especially a visual artist, to think about and understand on some level what you're communicating. Because it is communication. It's visual communication, but it's communication. That's always been part of my passion for making images; the 'what am I saying?'"

Artists whose work he really admires, Eric Fischl among them, are able to create an incredibly rich narrative without telling you what to think. Creating a balanced narrative in art can be tricky. When he was in undergraduate school, Ian's illustration courses pushed the subjective narrative. Social issues, including police brutality, the first Gulf war, AIDs, abortion, were subjects for some very dark images that very intentionally conveyed his personal opinion. Years later and in graduate school, the push was toward a less "tyrannical" and more suggestive narrative. It was in swinging back in the opposite direction that he was able to find a point of balance in the center. His narrative art has since evolved to create a dialog within each piece that allows the viewer to form his/her own interpretation. A series he did of the wildfires in Oregon was inspired by back country hikes he made through the areas most affected. Inserting images of a model from life drawing classes he was conducting around the same time lends a provocative note that is left up to the viewer to interpret.

"This is a pretty deep and layered conversation I get into with my art students, especially when I teach narrative classes, is there any such thing as true, 100% objectivity in art? It's all personal. As objective as you try to be, there's always going to be some emotional content. How you even present the image is subjective," says Ian.

Teaching has always been an essential aspect of Ian's art. After completing his own education with a BFA from the School of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University and MFA from the New York Academy of Art where he graduated Cum Laude, he taught fine art, illustration and design in universities and academies from New York City to Guangxi, China, for more than 20 years. Most recently, he founded the Bend Academy of Art in Bend, Oregon.

Founding and directing the Academy was a pivotal step in Ian's path as an art educator. He had been teaching art at the university in Bend and was struck by how limited the curriculum was in classical training. Steeped in classical training in anatomy and figure drawing, his focus as an artist was on de-



constructing and reconstructing the human figure on paper and canvas, but also in clay. Bend Academy gave him the autonomy to develop a curriculum based in the classical approach to figurative and illustrative art that encompassed technical narrative. Students could also take advantage of study-abroad workshops, including on a bio-organic farm outside of Sienna, Italy, where Ian had previously taught. As enrollment grew, Bend Academy moved to a non-profit status. It seemed a culminating moment in his teaching career, until real estate in Bend became unaffordable almost overnight. Then, when he finally found a place and was about to sign a long-term lease, COVID hit. Even with students enrolled in courses via Zoom, it became clear to him that Bend, Oregon, wasn't the right place for his vision.

Coincidentally, Judith Evergreen saw it as a pivotal moment to sell the former church building that housed her retail business in Bridgton for forty-five years. Craftworks, a successful retail clothing and homewares store, was the unofficial anchor of Main Street until it officially closed in spring of 2020.

In *Lake Living* summer 2015, we interviewed Judith about her decades-long relationship with the building, from her intention to preserve and reuse it, to her decision to move on: "The building is very special and could be used for other purposes. Retail or restaurant, beyond that I'm not sure . . . Anyone who has been there has been successful. The Catholic congregation left because they outgrew it. I do think there is some karmic stuff with buildings sometimes."

The "other purposes" Judith alluded to could not have been more in line with what motivated her in 1975 to buy what so many others would have seen as a white elephant and of which she admitted, "I think you had to be an artist to see it as a good thing." Judith has a graduate degree in fine arts from Rutgers University.

When Ian returned to New England in the spring of 2020 and saw that Judith had put the building on the market, he saw it as a good thing. The open expanse was not unlike a blank canvas on which he could envision a cultural arts center; a flexible space



in which he could live, paint, teach, and exhibit his art, as well as house artists-in-residency and hold performances. Designing it as a convertible space that can be as public or private as called for was key to making it work as a multi-use whole. Pocket doors and thoughtful layout make that possible.

Since he bought the building, the only brushes he's had in his hand have been for painting walls, trim and molding. He jokes that he's either one of two places; there or at Lowe's. He originally thought the work would be completed and he would be up and running in two months. Four months later, he had the same time line, although it's worth noting that most of the construction was accomplished by local contractor Dan Perry with Ian as assistant.

As with any old building, this one held hidden secrets. They knew in advance that all of the single-glazed, arched windows needed to be replaced with insulated, double-glazed windows, but they didn't know that all of the frames would have to

be replaced as well. One large and twelve smaller arches were individually fabricated from five layers of wood, glulamed in wood clamps overnight. Since the twelve smaller ones were not exactly the same size, four different templates were needed to make them. They also didn't know that all of the sills were rotted and needed replacing. Or that the walls were largely uninsulated. Because the building is at the foot of a sloped area, the basement had to be lined with an impervious membrane to provide a barrier for the near-constant moisture that lurked beneath.

Once they addressed the issues, they were able to frame the interior. While the goal was to adapt it for 21st-century residential/commercial use, the intention was to preserve the architectural integrity of the 150-year-old building. Living space at the back, including a master bedroom suite, guest bedroom suite, living room and kitchen, occupy about a third of the space. A staircase leading to a loft area above and beyond the living space was added to

provide storage and event space seating. The back wall was broken through and double doors with arched transoms now open onto gardens in the back that are ideal for plein air painting and drawing classes. A large deck similar to the one on the front of the building is planned for the back.

In addition to classes, Factor Fine Art Center for the Arts plans to offer multi-day workshops, visiting artist workshops, film screenings, performance art, and possibly weddings and special events. Collaborating with faculty from Fryeburg Academy's art and audio/visual program provides the opportunity for high school students to take part in apprenticeship, certificate and continuing ed programs.

From the standpoint of preservation and reuse, it's worth noting that over the span of 150 years the building has had few transformations, with this one being the most dramatic. It feels fitting that its latest mission as a center for the arts is to create a cultural hub for the community. It's an evolving space that has somehow kept its original intent, which is bringing people together in a communal spirit. Amen. 🌻