



## Los Gatos artist Lou Bermingham found inspiration, and amour, in France

By Jennifer van der Kleut

Photography: George Sakkestad, Los Gatos Weekender

### Los Gatos Weekender

In a time when the world is struggling through economic strife and culture clashes, Lou Bermingham believes he has an answer.

It may not solve mankind's problems completely, but he believes it can offer respite from the day's stresses and concerns.

The answer is art.

Since childhood, Bermingham, who now owns a studio in Holy City in the Los Gatos hills, has been working hard to infuse a sense of creativity, inspiration and positive energy into the world with his colorful, abstract artwork — and the world has been responding positively. For more than two decades, Bermingham has been exhibiting and selling his creations in countries across the globe, and today, he is continuing that tradition with a show at the Triton Museum in Santa Clara.

Bermingham's introduction to art came early in life. "I was one of those kids who was always drawing and painting. I was really fortunate that my mom was very well educated and really appreciated art. When she saw I had a real interest in drawing and painting, from the time I could walk, she really encouraged me," Bermingham recalls. "So when I was given my first set of paints at age 4, I started experimenting with oil and pastel paintings, and it just came naturally."

Throughout his life, Bermingham has traveled extensively, exploring other cultures, which helped foster his love for art even more. His father, Arnold, a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, was stationed for a time in Paris during World War II, where he met his future wife, Maryse. As a child, the family — including Bermingham's younger sister, Gigi — visited his mother's home country of France twice, first when he was 6 and again when he was 16.

"That was hugely influential, both in my art and my life," he says. "I saw the gargoyles at the Notre Dame, and that got me really interested in the art of architecture. I was introduced to all sorts of art I'd never considered, like abstract paintings, Paleolithic cave drawings and even comic books, like Spiderman,

Dr. Strange and the Silver Surfer." Bermingham continued to explore the works of some of the world's most famous and influential artists, including Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. However, he says it was during the family's second trip to France that his fascination with art reached a powerful turning point.



Lou Bermingham with his painting "Loup Garou" at his Los Gatos Studio.

"I saw this artist's work, Yves Klein, and was just floored," Bermingham recalls. "He was part of this group of artists in the '40s and '50s, and did this incredible series of monochromatic paintings, meaning each painting was done all in one color but in different saturations. It blew my head clear off." From that point on, Bermingham says his art really began to mature, and through practice and exploration, his own style began to emerge.

After graduating from high school, he enrolled in the fine arts baccalaureate program at San Jose State University.

"From about age 16 to 20, I was mostly into surrealistic work, and then around age 20, when I was at San Jose State, I started to get more experimental. I really started looking at artists like Joan Collins — who was the first real female abstract artist — Jackson Pollack and Joseph Beuys, and they were really influential on me," he explains. "Now I consider myself an abstract artist, which is kind of ironic, since I never liked that style at first when I was growing up." His childhood visits to France had such a profound effect on him that Bermingham decided to take advantage of San Jose State's Junior Year Abroad program. He spent 1976 studying at the Ecole des Beaux Art in the city of Aix-en-Provence, just north of Marseilles.

"Aix-en-Provence is very similar to Berkeley; it's a great college town," he describes. "Especially growing up bilingual, it was really helpful to study at the art school there. I got exposed to a lot of different kinds of art." The year was so helpful, in fact, that it gave Bermingham his first real chance to exhibit his art, in a display at the Gallery d'Aix.

During his year in France; Bermingham also had his first brush with what became a lifelong love — the Japanese martial art of Aikido.

Bermingham says he had visited the gymnasium at Ecole des Beaux Art one night, looking for a class or group to work out with, when he happened upon an Aikido demonstration.

"Watching this Aikido master from Japan that night, it was dynamic, like magic," he recalls. "I was hooked on it, right from that first day. I immediately started training twice a day, five days a week, and did that for the entire school year."

Later in life, when Bermingham put down roots in Los Gatos, he continued his training through the Los Gatos-Saratoga Community Education and Recreation Department, where he eventually rose to the position of head Aikido instructor.

That year spent in France also led to future trips — while studying in Aix-en-Provence, Bermingham made friends with a Sudanese student, also on exchange for the year. After hearing all about his new friend's home country, he decided to spend the summer in the Sudan between his junior and senior years, and a few years later, he found himself living and working in Egypt for a year, with a cousin. There, Bermingham was given another opportunity to show his art on the international scene, with an exhibit at Gallery Zamalak in Cairo.



Los Gatos artist Lou Bermingham pours off the excess water as he mixes paint on canvas during the process of creating his next painting.

After returning home to the Bay Area, Bermingham continued to hone his craft over the next several years.

In 1990, he made an unlikely contact while walking his girlfriend, Christy — now his wife — to the theater in downtown San Jose one night. The friend he made that night set several things in motion for his blossoming art career.

"We were waiting around to go to the Montgomery Theater, and a friend of mine had some of his sculpture on display in the Dorfman Building nearby, so we walked over there," he recalls. "As we walked in, we passed a salon inside the building. The salon was closed, but I noticed there was music coming out of there, and a man was sitting by the entrance in a director's chair, and there was all this art on the wall."

Bermingham beckoned his wife over, and they peered inside to admire the hanging art. The man in the director's chair struck up a conversation with him, and the rest is history: He ended up offering Bermingham his first solo exhibit, which turned out to be a huge success.

"I ended up selling six of the 10 paintings I showed," Bermingham recalls proudly.

Kevin Miya, the owner of the salon, became a dear friend of Bermingham's, even acting as a sort of unofficial manager for his art career as it continued to flourish over the next few years.

"I knew him for nine months, almost to the day, before he passed away suddenly. That's very symbolic, I feel, since that is the time it takes to create a life," he says.

Since that time, nearly 20 years ago, Bermingham 's art has graced the walls of some of the world's finest galleries. In the San Jose area, he has been featured at WORKS Gallery, the De Silva Art Gallery, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, the Allegra Gallery and the San Jose Museum of Art; in San Francisco, he has been exhibited at the Morrell Morrell Galleries and In the Distance Gallery; in the West Valley, his work has been displayed at West Valley College and Los Gatos' own art museum on Tait Avenue; and he received a special award from the Santa Cruz Art League in 1994.

Bermingham has also demonstrated a wealth of other artistic talents through many uncommon means. Showing his love of the glass arts, he assisted in the installation of stained glass windows at local Bay Area businesses such as Khartoum's bar in Campbell, and downtown Los Gatos hotspot Carry Nation's Irish bar.



Lou Bermingham mixes water and acrylic paint on his most recent work.

In 1998, Bermingham was invited to create a very special installation of art for the Margaret Wingrove Dance Company's performance at the San Jose Stage Company.

"Margaret Wingrove had seen my artwork many times, and had purchased a few of my pieces," he says, adding that working with the dance company "was a lot of fun. They projected one of my paintings as the backdrop on stage, and the dancers all wore costumes in the colors of my painting; I used a lot of deep blues." Bermingham has also exhibited his work in New York City, France, Egypt and Africa, and he was invited to be an artist-in-residence at the Vermont Studio Center. He has also been commissioned by countless private art collectors and corporations around the world to create custom art pieces.

"We are in awe at the depth of color and drama in Lou's artwork. We feel fortunate that we can view these pieces often, and that we made a great investment in a rising star," says Elaine Hamilton, vice president of worldwide human resources for the Marvell Technology Group, which has offices in the South Bay.

These days, Bermingham has just finished putting together his part of a group exhibit at the Triton Museum in Santa Clara, spotlighting the work of Bay Area abstract artists, entitled "Diverse Impressions: Bay Area Abstraction." He has already been invited to do another solo show at the Triton in the summer of 2010, for which he is currently hard at work preparing several special pieces.

"I'm extremely honored to be there; it's a really good museum," Bermingham says of the Triton. "The director and curator have always been really encouraging of my work." Working so far in advance is necessary, he says, because of the large scale of his pieces, which take a long time to complete.

"I'm always working on six, seven, eight pieces at once, because I never know which piece is going to move forward at any time. So I always have a lot going on," he explains.

Bermingham says he draws inspiration for his paintings from several sources, including his imagination and his hobbies.

"I really get a lot of inspiration from my dreams. I've always been able to remember most of my dreams, and I keep a dream journal. I often see incredible things in my dreams, and then I try to paint them as best I can," he says. "I'm also really influenced by the natural world, especially with my studio being in the hills; I hike a lot, and animals are very influential to me as well, even though my work is abstract." Hobbies such as his Aikido and his love for exploring caves often spark an idea for a painting.

"I often see really neat things while caving. So, when I feel inspired to start a new piece, I might have seen something while caving that I want to work on, or I might have seen a pattern or shape in a dream that really stuck with me, and it all kind of starts from there," he explains. "So there's a lot of spontaneity; I'll start with one of those things, and then as I work, it will change or evolve." Like many artists, Bermingham has a process he follows whenever he enters his Holy City studio to begin work on his art.

"When I go into my studio, I go through a process, starting with some Aikido and breathing exercises, which helps set the atmosphere for creating," he explains.

Bermingham believes that art can help heal the troubles of mankind.

"A strong belief of mine is that art-making is a process, which really allows the individual to transform his or her own vision into vital energy, or what we call in martial arts ki in Japanese or chi in Chinese. I think that's needed for the rebalancing of ourselves and our consciousness and our world — to bring beauty and harmony and a dynamic life into the world," he says. "I believe everyone is creative. Not everyone may be a painter, but I think everyone can express themselves in all different media, and I think that's important for everyone to realize, to help balance out this conflict-driven world." By surrounding themselves with inspiring art, Bermingham believes the people of the world can begin to make their world a better place — and his lifelong goal is to try and introduce such art into the world.

"I believe the use of color and various organic shapes can affect a conscious and positive change in individuals," he writes on his website.

If the opinions of art lovers around the world are any indication, it's possible the universe agrees with him.



Lou Bermingham, 4th degree black belt, throws student Craig Child during an advanced Aikido class at the Los Gatos Rec center.