

## VISIONARY ART

## The Art of Gary Brent Hilsen

**G**ary Brent Hilsen listens to jazz, show tunes, or any kind of music he finds soothing when he sets out to work on his paintings. But for Mr. Hilsen, perhaps the most soothing part is actually creating the work. “Doing my art is very healing for me,” he says. “I turn the music on and start painting.”

His art work usually involves faces and figures, but he does not work with models. He’s been painting for more than 20 years, and never named his paintings until recently—in time for recent exhibitions at the Fountain Gallery in New York City.

Though not formally trained as a fine arts painter, Mr. Hilsen did study advertising art, and moved to New York from Michigan to be a fashion or costume designer.

He says that when he got his own place, the next logical step might have been to create art and to display the work at home.

“I only wanted original art on the walls,” he says. But creating art for that purpose was not his approach. “Emotionally, I put what I’m feeling into my work,” he says. “I don’t do it to decorate.”

Describing his work as cerebral and eclectic, Mr. Hilsen considers his art to be expressionist in style. “My work comes from within,” he says. “Painting resonates in my heart and soul.”

His late mother, the host of a local radio show, and an art and antiques dealer, also was very creative. Her opinion of his work was important to Mr. Hilsen, and he says

when his paintings began to sell, he quickly earned his mother’s respect.

Mr. Hilsen can paint murals, clothing, or furniture, and he is proud of his versatility. “As an artist, if you can see yourself doing something, I think, just do it,” says Mr. Hilsen, who is 53 and was diagnosed with chronic depression at age 19. Looking back, he believes he suffered with depression his entire life. Mr. Hilsen also is legally blind. Because of his condition, he has to work close to paintings when he’s creating them. For Mr. Hilsen, remaining open-minded is key to being an artist.

“When you don’t limit yourself, you get something special,” he says.

—Deeanna Franklin



**Miss Baker, 2007**  
‘I like it when people look at my work and see something new each time. I also like women’s faces; they’re more interesting than those of men. I don’t make simple backgrounds—they’re just as important.’



**Come Here Pretty One, 2006**  
‘One day, I just started painting it. At exhibits, I like to stand back and hear what observers say.’

### A Whole Family, 1998 and 2006

‘I started this when I first started painting. I put a dog in it [a few years later]. I thought: “This could be my family.” I’ve always had a close relationship with dogs, and that’s what made it a family.’

