

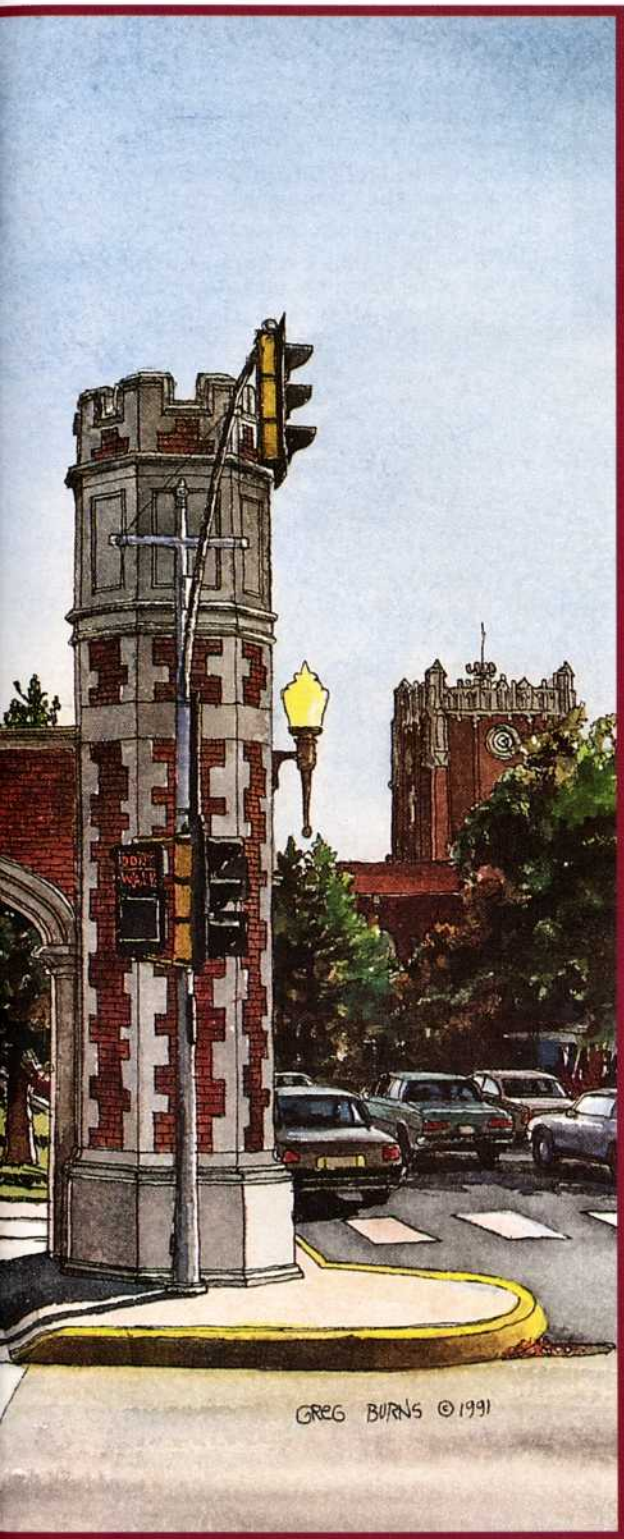
REINVENTING REALITY:

The View from Campus Corner, University of Oklahoma



GREG BURNS

AND THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE



Greg Burns, OU-educated, ink-and-watercolor artist, works quickly in a crowded study at his Oklahoma City home. He engages a visitor in soft-spoken conversation while leaning his narrow face over a sheet of smooth French paper, his right hand propelling a Rapidograph pen over the details of a work-in-progress.

Then the conversation pauses. Suddenly a just-finished painting lying on the corner of his desk seems to speak for him:

It is a warm, serene afternoon at the Oklahoma City Zoo, on an anonymous and eternal day during the 1950s. The zoo's original train ride, long defunct in the three-dimensional world, chugs anew along its track. From a vantage point of perhaps 50 yards away, we see in the open-air train cars a crowd of children – giggling and gawking in innocent pleasure, no doubt. Farther away, Judy the Elephant stands placidly in her cage, her back warming in the unhampered sunshine.

Here, the green grass will never fade, the children will never want, the cherished elephant will never pass away, and the train will always roll on.

“It’s kind of like I ‘make history,’” Burns explains, gesturing toward the zoo painting. “I don’t know if Judy the Elephant was viewable from that direction, but it just seemed right.”

Over a three-decade-plus career, Burns has found success in producing thousands of highly detailed, representational paintings—many of which apply his vision to buildings, people and facets of everyday life around him. *Continued*

by Michael Waters



Viewing Greg Burns' highly detailed, representational paintings is like revisiting favorite landscapes and landmarks, past and present. His distinctive style and his determination in overcoming his physical challenges have made the OU graduate one of Oklahoma's best-known and admired artists.

"In a scene like this, I take different components from, say, old postcards and put them together. I can't go there and take pictures of it now — it doesn't exist anymore. So I'm creating something like it."

All of this fits in with how Burns describes his personal goal—to create "an emotion or sense of time and location, not a photographic rendering."

He has artistically "visited" numerous regional landmarks, landscapes, mountains and "little places"—along with a number of OU class buildings and settings—combining the creative spirit of an artist and the pinpoint expertise of an architect.

His work regimen reveals care and precision. He spends five days or more on a painting, making countless small ink-marks across pencil-sketch lines on paper. Although many of his paintings are well-defined studies of architectural structures, he eschews rulers or other drafting tools.

"I'm doing it in an organic manner, putting the right line in the right place. There's no backup—if you put the line in the wrong place, that's where it's going to be." He compares the process to "walking a tightwire."

"It's hard work, but when it's done you have such a great feeling of accomplishment," he explains. "The result isn't a photograph. It may not even be accurate. But it's an interpretation."

Limited in the use of his limbs by a birth defect, Burns applies watercolor to the pen-and-ink drawing by holding the brush in his teeth. While watercolor often has a runny appearance, Burns uses a more dry-brush technique, "which means that there's more pigment. And the paint won't run, because the ink is pumice."

His hard work, interpretative sense and attention to

detail have won him commissions from businesses and agencies to preserve their buildings on canvas. Reproductions of Burns' paintings are widely given as gifts and have benefited numerous area charities.

Yet success for this celebrated artist has come only after mastering challenges that most other artists—or human beings in general, for that matter—never have to face.

Born in 1947 in Fort Worth, Texas, Burns was diagnosed with a birth defect called arthrogryposis multiplex congenita. A joint and muscle disease, Burns says that the disorder put him in "a very small community" of disabled individuals.

"All of us seem to have determination, hardheadedness and grit," he says. "It's important that the families, like mine, are very supportive. I was fortunate to grow up with a family like that."

While other young boys were discovering swimming and baseball, Burns learned about hospital rooms. Most summers during his early years, he underwent corrective surgery, usually

at University Hospital in Oklahoma City. Eventually, the family moved to Oklahoma, living successively in Chickasha, Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

"I didn't really walk until I was seven," he remembers. "I went to Catholic schools like St. Patrick's in Oklahoma City, St. Mary's in Tulsa, and then back to Oklahoma City, at Christ the King. The nuns wouldn't let you get by with anything."

Still, he remembers himself as a "normal, happy-go-lucky fellow" in boyhood. "I had a lot of friends, and they'd push me around in my wheelchair on the playground. I remember at St. Patrick's, at recess, we'd find a board and slip it through the wheelchair and make an airplane out of me—great fun!"

Growing into adolescence, however, Burns felt increasingly distanced from other teenagers.

"All the other kids were starting to do the 'dance of life.' People were suddenly talking about sex, about getting cars, and I didn't have any idea where I fit in. It was the first time I *felt* disabled," he says.

"But all of this rectified itself when I started doing pictures."

Burns had long taken to drawing, filling his school-books with scribbled renderings of armored tanks and airplanes. They were probably, he says, no better or no worse than other children's art—except that they were exceptionally detailed.

And even as a child, his work was noticed. As Burns grew into his high school years, the first-place ribbons from children's art shows and state fair competitions became first-place ribbons from organizations such as the Oklahoma Museum of Conservative Art—an organization

dedicated to fostering the type of representational painting at which Burns came to excel.

Deprived of other outlets for his young energies, Burns developed a passion for drawing. "When I was able to go to high school, they wouldn't let me take art classes my first year—it was considered an elective. So every chance I got, I plastered my nose against the art room door, to see what was happening there."

In 1960, Burns received a scholarship from the Oklahoma Science and Art Foundation. The Foundation also allowed him to skip the children's classes and study with the adults. Then in high school, he won a national award from the Sister Kenny Art Institute.

"So, I stopped doodling and started drawing pic-

"I was listening to him, and suddenly I felt elated.

Instantly, what he said smoothed over the rough stuff.

There were no more troubled waters. I knew exactly what I was going to do."

older than me, relatively speaking," he recalls. "It was a *lot* of fun—an absolutely wonderful time. There were new ideas going around."

The art school provided soil that even a representational artist, a "card-carrying member of the Oklahoma Museum of Conservative Art," could take root and grow in, Burns chuckles.

He recalls taking classes with Gene Bavinger, "such a wonderful guy," and John Hadley, "the most inspiring teacher I had." He did some typically offbeat college art—for example, a triptych that included among its elements a hundred-pound gunny sack of cabbages nailed to its canvas.

But a new round of surgery forced him to miss his junior year, and he recalls that he felt uncertain and "foundering" while the robed shadow of Grim Reality lurked around the corner, waiting to take him to a secure and more-or-less predictable career in his major field.

What changed Burns' life, he remembers, was some friendly advice from an uncle—which had anything but its intended effect.

"He told me, 'You're not going to be able to make a living at art.'" The uncle also reassured Burns that he could easily attain a career position with a state agency doing counseling work, with the promise of a healthy income and long-term job security—though he "might not like" the job.

"I was listening to him, and suddenly I felt elated. Instantly, what he said smoothed over the rough stuff. There were no more troubled waters. I knew *exactly* what I was going to do," Burns says.

"I switched my major to art."

Continued



Bizzell Memorial Library, OU

Burns hurried through the last year-and-a-half of his studies, taking 19 hours in one semester. In 1970 he finished a bachelor of fine arts in drawing and printmaking.

Actually, Burns says, he wanted to try to make a living as a printmaker after graduation. "I really wanted to get an etching press—that was part of my major. It's a difficult process and very expensive. I did make some etchings, and I couldn't get anybody to buy them."

But the "hard-headed" young artist turned out to be hard-nosed as well. While willing to take the risk of stepping into an art career, his mind and heart told him to concentrate on a style of art that would maximize his chances of "making it."

"Because of my disability," he says, "I understood that certain things would cost me more money—for example, to get a car and have it fixed up so I could drive it. There were a lot of things I couldn't do myself. I'd have to pay somebody else to do them for me."

"So, I thought, 'You *have* make a living at this.' I set out, initially and immediately, to do the kind of art that people would want."

The nature of the times also influenced Burns' choice of subject matter. It was a time when urban renewal funds were being pumped into Oklahoma, among other states, and suddenly "it seemed like everyone was in a mad rush to get rid of everything that was old."

Burns, who had long been attracted to turn-of-the-century houses and antique structures of all varieties, became somewhat of a preservationist, "restoring" old buildings and settings of long ago that had been swept aside by the rush into modernity, and putting his interpretations of them on paper.

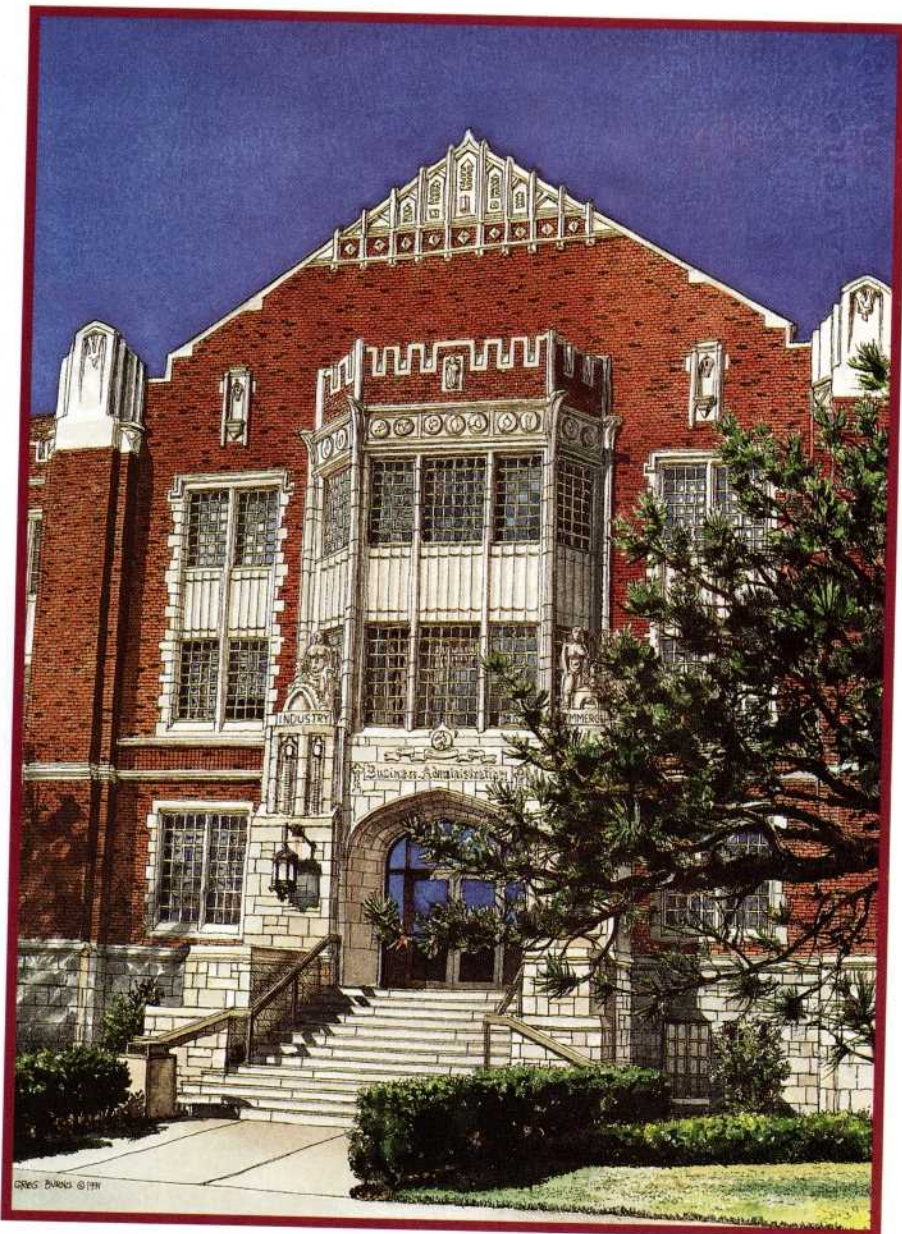
It turned out to be a popular concept.

"While I was still in school, I'd been pretty much making a living, paying a lot of my tuition with paintings. I did my OU art during the week and did my other pictures on the weekend." He sold at area shows, sometimes grossing \$600 to \$1000 per weekend.

In 1967, he became one of 43 artists who participated in the first year of Oklahoma City's Festival of the Arts—a relationship that has continued ever since, with the exception of a recent three-year sabbatical. That opportunity to sell originals and reproductions brought statewide and regional attention to the talented newcomer.

"My first year out of school, I made \$55,000, and that was back in 1971—it was a lot of money!" he recalls. "My mother had opened a gift shop, so I had a studio there for several years."

With increased income and recognition came enhanced



Adams Hall, OU

opportunities. In 1976, Burns won a commission to create that year's Governor's Arts Award. In 1978, his new wife, Patricia, helped him to better market his abilities.

A teacher at Westminster School in Oklahoma City, Patricia "put her 'teacherly' organizational skills to work for me," Burns says, adding that her instincts have been a substantial boost to his success.

"Sometimes I'd draw some rotted-out something-or-other that I was interested in just for the texture of it. But a wife gives you a different perspective on this. I started doing pictures of 'neat' buildings, not run-down ones. And I discovered that pictures like *that* sell more easily, and for more money."

"We became a great team. It was a real, real pleasure to develop a concept, carry it through and watch it become a success."

As an example, Burns recalls the painting he did of Oklahoma City's famous "Graffiti Bridge," a 1936 railway bridge which, until its demolition several years ago, was

painted and repainted by area students. "I did it for the Arts Festival, and we sold over 400 prints in addition to the original picture," he says.

The reproductions had an added lure—the bridge was left plain white, so that the buyer could fill in the graffiti himself.

Probably his most popular work over the years is a portrait of Oklahoma City's "Milk Bottle Building," another local landmark known to residents and visitors alike. Some 2,000 reproductions of the work have been sold.

Patricia soon left her teaching job to give more time to helping Burns in his career, and in 1986 they opened a gallery in northwest Oklahoma City. The gallery has come to represent the bulk of Burns' sales—now, he says, instead of packing the car full of artwork and traveling from show to show, "we have people come to us."

Success has allowed the couple to travel extensively, in Europe as well as the United States. And Burns' work has allowed him to "revisit" portions of OU's campuses several times, at least in spirit.

With typical conscientiousness, he has created precise images of the OU Health Sciences Library and the College of Dentistry. An autumn portrait of Monnet Hall reflects his love of color patterns as well as an appreciation for the University's older architecture.

Burns also has put on paper such well-known OU scenes

as the outside of Owen Stadium on a football game day and a study of the 1922 arches on the north side of the main campus. He rues that he did not make more of an attempt as an OU student to capture campus environs that have since disappeared.

"I wish I'd done a picture of Ernie's Town Tavern," he says. "But it doesn't exist any more. You can't go back. And there aren't any pictures of what was inside."

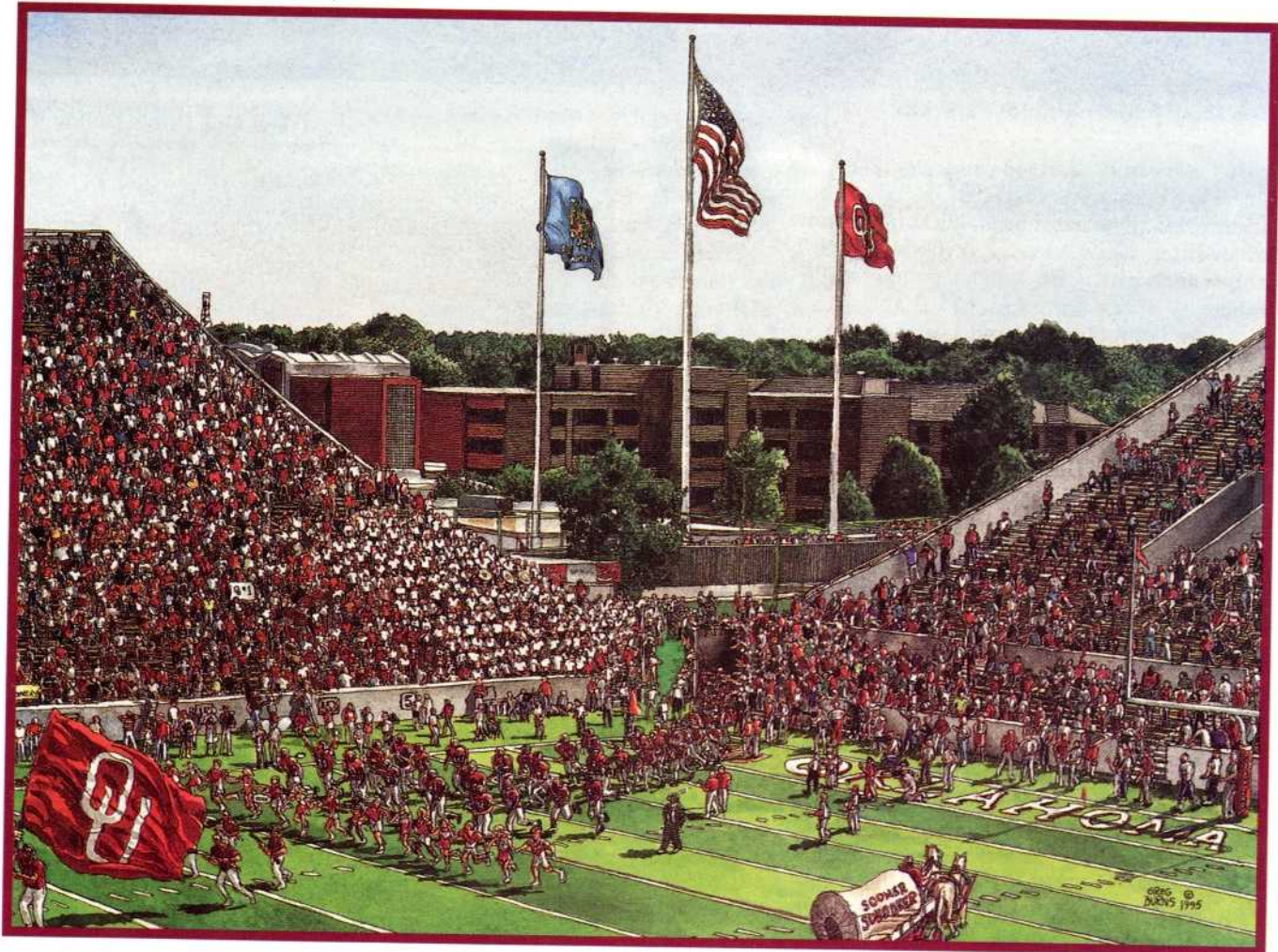
A similar sense of longing continues to infuse Burns' work today. After three decades of working in his chosen medium, he says that "I haven't really said what I want to say yet. It would be nice as I become more mature to say *something* in my artwork.

"I don't know what that is," he adds, "but I'm enjoying the search."

In the meantime, he appreciates the recognition his work has brought him. In 1978, he was given the Governor's Art Award. In 1987, he was one of 20 artists nationwide featured in *Profiles in the Arts*, published by the National Endowment for the Arts and the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped.

And he has shown in turn his willingness to "give back" by providing works for charity—such as the paintings, Christmas cards and note cards he did for the Oklahoma Foundation for the Disabled, to help that organization provide day

Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, OU





The Duck Pond in Brandt Park, OU.

care for severely disabled children and adults.

In the decades since Burns began scribbling drawings while lying in hospital beds, his subject matter and choice of medium, while certainly evolving, have been remarkably consistent. He laughs gently while mulling the congruity of his works.

“Here I am, 50 or so, and I can’t really come up with a great idea for a mid-life crisis. I guess I’m just boring.”

Is there a thought-out philosophy underpinning that constancy? He shrugs and replies, “To me, it’s showing appreciation for where we’ve been. As a society, we lose too many things, as everything around us becomes ‘un-unique.’ I guess the thing that makes me most happy about what I do is, hopefully, that it puts people a little more at ease.”

But he adds, “In some ways, it’s silly to talk about it, because what I’m trying to do is communicate without talking.”

His voice trails off as his right hand applies the last few ink-strokes with the Rapidograph. A creative image of the children’s park at Lake Hefner emerges. Within a day, the brush will once again be between his teeth, applying bright color to kites and kids and lakeside greenery.

And soon, a new painting will speak on his behalf, in its own exquisite and wordless language.

Editor’s Note: Catalogues of Greg Burns paintings may be obtained from Greg Burns Fine Art & Framing, 9303 North Penn Place, Oklahoma City, OK 73120, (405) 842-5024.

The Milk Bottle Building

