

Childhood hobby becomes one-of-a-kind museum
for artist, musician and toy collector Kevin Stark.

A Museum for Kids of All Ages

By TAMI ALTHOFF



A day with Kevin Stark is a trip down a rabbit hole of creativity.

A consummate showman, Stark can often be seen walking the brick streets of Pauls Valley, wearing his customary black suit and tie, wire-rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, as he greets friends and strangers alike. As inspiration moves him, Stark divides his time between his Toy and Action Figure Museum and his art gallery and music studio a half block away. If the universal symbol for having an idea is a light bulb, Stark's brain would be a fireworks display.

He's the toy guy, the turtle guy, the guy who takes 45 minutes to grab a carton of milk because someone on the dairy aisle recognizes him and strikes up a conversation. The discussion may be about music, the toys he designs for lines like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and The Simpsons, or the vast collections he has stashed in his museum, studio, warehouse space and, sometimes, even his car.

"I joke that I'm an unofficial tourist attraction," Stark says.

Stark's fascination with toy collecting began when he was 10. He got a job delivering newspapers to bankroll his growing hobby and then convinced his parents to let him claim the basement for his first action-figure dioramas.

"That, I think, was the beginning of the museum and my collection, because I could set them all up and keep them set up," he says.

Stark continued to collect toys into adulthood and began designing them in 1990 at the request of writer and director John Schulte, a friend he met at the University of Oklahoma,

where he studied fine art under the direction of John Hadley, Richard Wood and Marilyn Murphy.

"John had a literary fanzine and would ask me to do illustrations, so he knew I could draw weird stuff really fast," Stark says. "He calls me up, it's like six o'clock in the evening, and says, 'How would you like to design toys for the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles?'"

Stark was on a plane to Los Angeles by nine the next morning and has been designing toys for that line and others ever since.

Many of those toys, as well as those from his childhood collection, are on display inside the 7,000-square-foot space on Chickasaw Street. The museum, featured in magazines around the world and once named by *Time Magazine* as one of 50 places in the United States to see true Americana, should be added to the itinerary of anyone traveling through Pauls Valley.

Opened in 2005, the museum houses about 13,000 toys and action figures, representing only a small portion of Stark's collection. Toys spanning decade after decade line shelves and display cases, encompassing almost any line imaginable—1950s Western figures, superheroes, monsters, sports, Transformers, Barbie, Strawberry Shortcake, and the list goes on. Collections also showcase different characters, creators and companies. A rotating gallery is currently dedicated entirely to "Star Wars."

"We get two kinds of people who come here," he says. "We get people who love action figures and people who want to know what in the heck does an action figure museum look like?"

One of the most popular displays is the collector's bedroom diorama, a massive "I spy" collection that is the stuff of childhood dreams.

"A lot of people connect with their childhood here. It's really nostalgic," Stark says. "Even people who come in thinking they won't enjoy it, they see stuff they had as a kid and they're like, 'Oh my gosh! I had that!' Suddenly, they're



Sally Cloud



Above - Stark began collecting toys and action figures at age 10 and never stopped. His museum was named by *Time Magazine* among the 50 places in the United States to see true Americana.

Right - Matinee idol Roy Rogers occupies a space dedicated to Western toys at the museum, along with Stark's framed portrait of Rogers' trusty horse, Trigger.

telling their kids they played with this or that. They walk out of here with a big smile on their face.”

Stark says it's those smiles that make all the hours he puts in worth it.

“The payoff is I do this for my community. I do this for Pauls Valley,” he says of his hometown. “We've had people here from over 40 countries and every state in the union. I have friends now in Germany, Australia, lots of different places, all because of this museum.”

In addition to his toy collection, Stark is a prolific artist and musician. If he happens to be in the museum and a visitor asks, he just might take them on a short walk from the museum to his gallery and studio, Stark Art Gallery, which houses an eclectic collection of its own.

Gallery visitors are greeted by eight-foot-tall marionettes, a 30-foot-long flying squid and more toys. The walls of the gallery are filled with paintings created by six seemingly different artists—Stark himself, along with Red Kittens, Brick Bradley, Salmon Chevy, Jett Black and Ivory Keyes. But, like most things touched by Stark, all is not what it seems.

“I'm actually a performance artist,” Stark explains. “So, all the





Though this work may look like a photograph, Stark's "Celebrate the Loss" was created in pencil, demonstrating that behind Pauls Valley's consummate showman is an artist of significant talent and emotional depth.

art you see in here I've done, only under different names and different characters. I create an artist, then I create their work."

Tucked in the back of the gallery is his studio, the place where the images in his head come to life and his band, Squeaky Burger One, performs. It will come as no surprise that Stark serves as all the members of the band, playing each instrument himself.

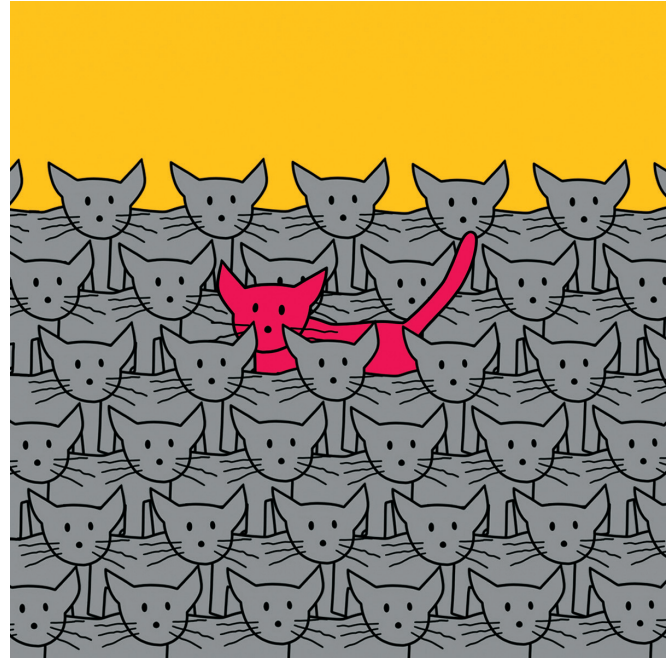
Stark says he began creating art under different names because when people visit an art gallery, they expect to see only one type of art from each artist and he didn't want to be pigeonholed.

"I've always wanted to paint in different styles. People can't wrap their head around that," he says. "It's much easier for me to promote other artists than it is for me to promote me."

One wall of his gallery features the Paisley Portraits, all paintings of famous people who influenced him when he was growing up. The collection includes Clint Eastwood, John Wayne and Ho-Ho the Clown, to name a few. And yes, Ho-Ho, who had a long-running children's program on local TV station KOCO, had a profound influence on the young Stark.

"When I was a kid, you could send in your art to his show," Stark says. "I sent in some of my art, and he showed it on the air."

Other paintings in the gallery include portraits of women, landscapes, wildlife, comical kittens, gods and goddesses that are part of his Starkology project (another story for another day), and dozens of self-portraits of Stark himself, as every New Year's Eve for the past 46 years he has started a self-portrait that



A prolific artist, Stark lets his imagination run free by working under the persona of several separate characters, including artist "Red Kittens."

he finishes in 24 hours.

"I've done art my whole life," Stark says. "When I was 4, I knew exactly what I wanted to be. As my dad tells it, we were watching a documentary on Michelangelo. I watched the whole thing and, when it was over, I turned to him and said, 'That's what I want do. I want to be an artist.'"

OU professor emerita of art Carol Beesley is a fan and friend.

"Kevin is one of the most imaginative and artistically talented people I know," Beesley says. "He is modest; he never talks about himself; he is kind. Everything he touches is magic."

Beesley is an ambassador for Stark, bringing friends and relatives to Pauls Valley and encouraging everyone she knows to visit his gallery and museum.

"What a treat for children to go to someplace like that," she says. "It's family-oriented, and I love that. It's an amazing museum. Practically everyone who goes there has one or more of the toys from their childhood. It's really an Oklahoma treasure."

Stark says despite what he's already done, there's a lot he'd still like to do. That includes finding a drivable 1966 Batmobile to display in front of the museum.

"I feel that your imagination is a muscle. You have to exercise it in order for it to function. The more you exercise it, the easier all of these things come," he says. "The museum is a unique concept, and that's what draws people. We need more unique concepts."

For more on Stark's projects, see <https://www.toyandactionfiguremuseum.com/> and kevinstarkart.com.



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