

High Profile

— Arkansas Democrat  Gazette —

George Warren Criswell

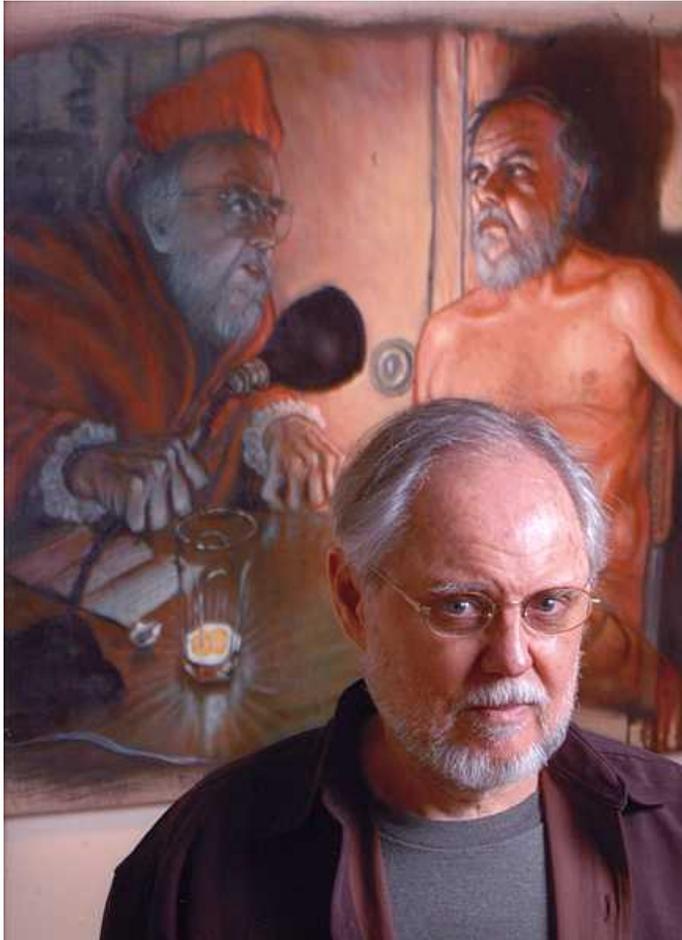


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A '70s road hippie, Warren Criswell finally found a home in Central Arkansas. Look for his paintings in prominent places.

By **BARBARA RUSSI SARNATARO**
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Ask Warren Criswell how he ended up living in Arkansas and he'll

tell you simply, "Little Rock was the last place the bus broke down."
That's the short version.

The long version, if you can get him to tell it, is much more interesting. In 1972, Criswell quit his job as a land surveyor - a trade he'd learned after running out of money in California trying to make a living as a painter and moving back home to West Palm Beach, Fla.

He and his wife, Janet, sold their house and pulled their daughters Kae and Kim (then 14 and 12) out of school. They bought an old city bus and, together with a fox named Layla and a raccoon named Angie, set off on a journey around the country to find a cheap piece of land.

"There were too many people in Florida," says the 66-year-old Criswell. "It was a back-to-the-land movement. We wanted to have a self-contained energy source where we wouldn't contribute to pollution. I thought if we could set up a homestead, I could write about it and that

"Coming back to visual art was sort of like the salmon returning to the spawning bed."

"Turns out it was too expensive and too hard," says Criswell. "An isolated homestead was not really the answer." Besides, he says, the autobiographical angle was wearing him out. "I was sick of my own voice," he says. He changed gears and started on an apocalyptic novel addressing the same issues of industrial collapse. After the ice caps melted and the sea level rose, flooding the Mississippi River Valley, his scenario chose Little Rock as the new coastline. "This was where I wanted my novel to take place," he says. "So I said, 'Let's go there.' "

The Criswells were in Ohio at the time, however, and he had just gotten word his California publisher was going out of business. By the time the family stopped at the KOA campground in North Little Rock in 1977, Criswell knew he would have to stop work on the novel and get a steady job. He was also starting to resent writing. "Writing became a battle between me and my typewriter," he says. "My guilty pleasure was teaching myself watercoloring in my stolen moments from the typewriter." He was doing very photorealistic watercolors, he says, "because I didn't want the Criswell to come through." It was his way of getting away from himself. During that time, he painted in a style, he says, "where there was no trace of the artist in the work."

would be my contribution."

This was Criswell the writer, formerly Criswell the failed painter turned land surveyor, soon to be Criswell the printer and not yet Criswell the successful artist.

Traveling the nation for five years, Criswell picked up odd writing jobs to pay the bills - jobs he says he would start and his wife would often take over while he worked on his homesteading tome, his tour de force, his "contribution to society."

Thinking back on it, he recalls how unappreciative he was at the time. "I was always looking for a woman like Henry Miller's Mona," he says, describing her as someone who would do everything for him to support his art. "It wasn't until much later that I realized I had married her."

In those five peripatetic years, the Criswells would stop sporadically when the money was scarce to get conventional jobs to support them until Criswell could complete the book.

But it never happened.

SELF PORTRAIT WARREN CRISWELL

- **DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH** Sept. 19, 1936, West Palm Beach, Florida
- **AMONG MY CONTRIBUTIONS TO CENTRAL ARKANSAS, I'M MOST PROUD OF** My 27 works in the permanent collection of the Arkansas Arts Center.
- **WHAT PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ABOUT PAINTING IS** That the artist is as much in the dark about it as everybody else.
- **THE BEST THING ABOUT PAINTING IS** That you don't have to deal with other people to do it.
- **THE HARDEST THING ABOUT PAINTING IS** The marketing part, where you *do* have to deal with other people.
- **WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, I WANTED TO BE** Either a painter, a writer or a musician. It took me 40 years to settle on one.
- **MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MEMORY IS** Exploring the wilderness around the headwaters of the Loxahatchee River west of Jupiter, Florida--or to put it another way, trespassing on the property of the legendary Trapper Nelson.
- **MY GUILTY PLEASURE IS** Eating a submarine sandwich in bed with my wife while watching a movie.

A FONDNESS FOR ARKANSAS

The family liked Arkansas, but ended up leaving when Criswell took a job - first, with the Corps of Engineers working on the levees on the Mississippi River, and later, learning the printing trade, in Natchitoches, La.

It wasn't long, however, before they found themselves back in Arkansas, where the bus broke down for the last time, and the Criswells knew they were going to have to get off the road once and for all.

"It was the end of our career as road hippies," he says, adding, "Around this time I stopped calling myself a writer and started calling myself a painter." It was 1978.

The bus they had originally named Toad Hall, taken from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, was renamed "Towed Haul" when it was towed to Benton. There Criswell had purchased land and a trailer from up-and-coming real estate investor Jack McCray and his father-in-law, Floyd Byrd.

"[McCray] was just a punk kid at the time," Criswell says. "We were trying to settle down. We'd spent too much time on the road. Jack got us a piece of property out in the woods and we had the bus towed there." Criswell had finally found the land he was looking for, though by this time he was no longer going to homestead.

He had come full circle. He was painting prolifically again, from his trailer, beside Towed Haul on his land near Benton.

"Coming back to visual art was sort of like the salmon returning to the spawning bed," he says.

He had his first show at Cantrell Gallery in the early 1980s.

He and Janet quit their printing jobs, and he painted while she started her own typesetting business, later adding a print shop where Criswell would occasionally help out. Mostly, however, these businesses supported Criswell's work as an artist.

Over the previous decade, he'd gone from a piece of wood across the steering wheel of his bus (his makeshift studio) to a small bedroom in the trailer to a storm cellar when a 1982 tornado overturned the bus and razed the trailer except for the bathroom where the family had hidden from the storm.

"It was Janet who saw the thing coming and just barely got us in there [the bathroom] in time and who got a gash on the head for her troubles," he says.

■ IF I COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT MYSELF I would be about 30 years younger.

■ MY FAVORITE BOOK IS ... Nobody who reads a lot could honestly answer that question, so I'll just name a few. At one time it might have been Homer's *Odyssey*; at another time Shakespeare's plays, Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion* or Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. At the moment it's Walter Mosely's *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

■ I DRIVE A 1993 Ford Escort with 200,000 miles on it.

■ MY PET PEEVE IS George W. Bush.

■ MY HOBBY IS Mathematics. If I lived on the water, it might be sailing.

■ THE TITLE OF THE MOVIE OF MY LIFE WOULD BE *Twisted*.

■ AT HEART, AN ARTIST IS Unbalanced, incomplete.

■ MY NEXT BIG GOAL IS To be on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*--I mean, *Art in America*.

■ ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP Polymorphous.

Piled in the small bathroom with Criswell and his wife were their daughter Kae, their grandson Christopher (the oldest of daughter Kim's four children) and Pete, "a friend who had traveled with us from Florida." Pete is featured in Criswell's painting "Pete Burning Trash" and a series of prints called "Pete Going Out for a Smoke."

Helen Scott and her husband, Norman, owners of Cantrell Gallery and close friends of Criswell's, rushed to Benton after getting a phone call from the emergency room.

"I have such strong memories of that day," says Scott. "We were just bewildered," she adds, describing the scene of the standing bathroom among the debris. Happily, no one was seriously hurt. The Criswells finally had the impetus to build the house they'd been planning to create.

STORM-CELLAR STUDIO

"My studio then became an 8-by-8-foot storm cellar," says Criswell. It was located beside daughter Kae and her husband Danny's house on the property. Criswell worked there until they finished their house, complete with a studio that runs along one side of the house.

Today, Janet and married daughter Kae Barron own a digital embroidery design business that continues to support Criswell's painting. Daughter Kim, also still in Benton, is a real estate and insurance agent, married with four children, Christopher, Daniel, Livvy and Ethan.

Criswell's life today is different from the upper-middleclass one he grew up resenting - at least in part.

"I've always felt, all my life, that I haven't suffered enough," he says. "I always felt like I had to atone."

Growing up an only child in West Palm Beach, he was called a prodigy: "As soon as I could hold a pencil I was drawing."

He was encouraged to draw and paint by his mother, Florence Criswell, whom he calls a "Sunday painter. I learned what an oil painting was from her. There was always paint around the house and the smell of linseed oil and turpentine, and I sort of absorbed that from her."

In the sixth grade, he took art lessons at Norton School of Art in West Palm Beach.

"Everyone thought I was going to be a cartoonist," he says. "But I grew out of that. I was sort of a rebellious kid. I didn't want to do what people wanted me to do. I drew like a cartoonist, though, not from real life or nature. I drew out of my head."

One thing he knew was that he didn't want to follow in father George L.

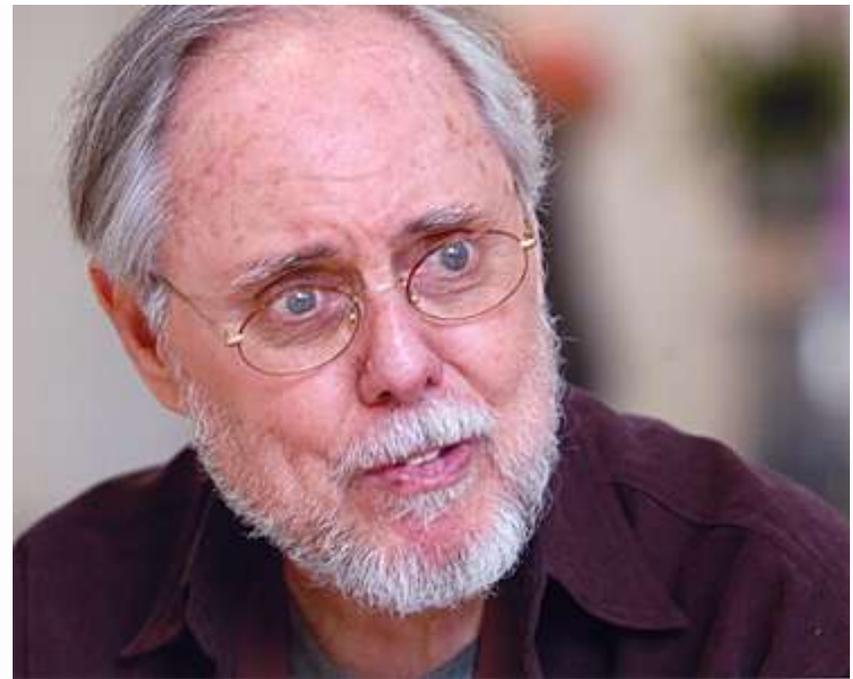


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"Writing became a battle between me and my typewriter. My guilty pleasure was teaching myself watercolor in my stolen moments from the typewriter."

Criswell's footsteps and become a banker. That seemed too staid and confining a career.

In high school, he discovered fine art in his first art appreciation class and "was taken by the abstract expressionists [Jackson] Pollock and [Willem] De Kooning."

He later became influenced by David Park, one of the main originators of the West Coast school of painting, and the figurative work of Richard Diebenkorn.

He began to emulate their work in his own, when he wasn't chasing girls and exploring the headwaters of the Loxahatchee River with his best friend, Ray Durrance.

"This was wilderness west of Jupiter owned by Trapper Nelson," he says.

"We were trespassing on the property of the now-famous Trapper Nelson.

We were 15. We read Lewis and Clark. We read *The Big Sky* by A.B.

Guthrie. We were mountain men, only there weren't mountains, there were swamps. We were swamp men."

LIFELONG BUDDIES

Ray Durrance, who now lives in Ann Arbor, Mich., has stayed in touch with Criswell over the years.

"He and I are lifelong buddies. We grew up in the same hometown of West Palm Beach, Florida. His parents and my parents were friends. We were introduced to each other practically at birth."

Durrance, who owns a library research business, says Criswell was more than just a wonderful partner in adventure, fellow bookworm and friend.

"He had an incredible talent even at that age," says Durrance. "He could represent anything on paper. Most of the time, he would have a sketchpad with him."

In the late 1950s, in fear of the draft, Criswell enlisted in the Marines. Criswell and his new wife, Janet (Seal), whom he married in 1957, were stationed at Camp Pendleton, Calif. He sprained his ankle and was medically discharged two years later.

"When I was discharged I thought I'd become a famous artist," Criswell says. "I was waiting a long time for people to discover me painting out there in the garage of my rented house. I kept waiting for the gallery owners to come but for some reason they didn't show up."

A few months later, Criswell called his dad to ask for money to get back home. He had 36 cents to his name. "That was my first real defeat in life ... not the last."

Back in Florida, he worked, first as a sign painter (which he says he was so bad at, he got laid off), then as a land surveyor.

All the while, the artist inside was growing more frustrated.

"I wanted to do things. I wanted to write and paint, but mostly, I just bitched about it instead of doing it," he says. "The pressure builds up and eventually the bottom falls out."

When he quit his job as a land surveyor to go on the road, it was the last job like that he ever had.

"That wasn't just a job, it wanted to possess my soul," says Criswell.

"After I quit, I felt really free. Other jobs I've had since then have just been something on the side."

Less than a decade later, most of his gypsy blood and romantic adventures sated, Criswell settled into painting, perhaps his ultimate fate. He also let the artist come through in his work and became more prolific because of it.

Besides being on display at Cantrell Gallery in Little Rock and Taylor's Contemporanea Fine Arts in Hot Springs, Criswell's work has appeared in exhibitions across Arkansas, as well as in Connecticut, New York, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Germany and Taiwan.

He is in the permanent collections at the Arkansas Arts Center, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Hendrix College, the Hot Springs Arts Center, Henderson State University, the University of Central Arkansas, the Central Arkansas Library System, the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina and Capitol Art Corporation in Taiwan.

He is having his first solo exhibit, a retrospective, at the Arkansas Arts Center through Aug. 10. It followed a show at Cantrell Gallery and a group show at University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

NOT THE BEST AUTHORITY

Like many artists, Criswell says, he's not good at describing his work or his motivations for painting a particular piece.

"The artist is not the best authority on his or her own work," he says. "I am looking at the outside now. Before, I was inside it. It's an inner thing. You're trying to get those things out into the world. It's sort of an exorcism."

As he grew as an artist, Criswell became inspired by Old Masters Van

Eyck and Caravaggio, eschewing the Modernism ideal for a darker style. More recently, he says, "I fell under the spell of Rembrandt." He was trying to challenge himself as an artist and "make a clean break from my expressionistic Florida past."

Criswell creates from somewhere deep inside his own head, crafting narratives - from comic to nightmarish - on a canvas with intricate precision. His muses come from literature, mythology, opera and everyday life.

"His compositions are just fantastic," says fellow artist and friend Sammy Peters, "but I don't think the composition is the thing that he's after. There's this kind of quality the painting has to take on - a magic point when a painting starts to breathe and takes on a life of its own, at least for the artist. He's really cognizant of what he wants and he knows it when he sees it."

Criswell makes his own paint, grinding dry pigments into oil, which he refines from raw linseed oil: "Using those old techniques to express present-day images sets up a kind of anachronistic tension that I like."

Scott adds that Criswell also makes a lot of his own frames, "I'm talking from the raw wood," she says, adding carved details and a gild.

Scott and her husband have been carrying Criswell's work since he arrived in Little Rock and would come in to get things framed back in 1979.

"From the very first [during his watercolor phase], he had things that were executed so well," says Scott. "When he changed, though there were times I couldn't identify with the subject matter, he was just so good at it. He has such a vast knowledge in so many fields. That makes a difference in his art."

Criswell has settled into his style over the years.

"There was a time when I thought that art, to be great - and we all want to do great art - had to be universal," he says.

But universal wasn't what he first thought it to be.

"Everybody sees the painting in a different way," he says. "They see it through the filter of their own lives. The key to the universal is the personal expression of the self and its unfulfilled desires and frustrations. And people will see that through their own frustrations. Within that focus, people will see their own personal variations on the theme. The universal is hidden inside the personal."

Some paintings are emotionally charged narratives, while others are simply landscapes or still lifes. Each begins with an image, he says, but its roots are in the unconscious.

According to Criswell, Robert Genn, a Canadian artist friend, calls the rare moments where everything from light to emotion aligns and you have to paint "Alpine moments." Genn thinks an artist might have 10 of these in a lifetime.

Criswell says he adopts that philosophy on a different level.

"These are not outward moments but inward, emotional moments that drive the artist's creativity. They won't appear in the artist's biography.

We don't always know what those moments are. I don't think you could track down exactly what it is that makes us do what we do in art."

His work might as easily be inspired by the Richard Strauss opera Salome or the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as by contemporary world events. He never knows. He just lets it happen.

"I can tell a lot of stories and try to construct a narrative," he says. "But with art, I'm strictly impulsive, painting a spontaneous image that I haven't really mapped out, so there's more honesty in my paintings than you will get out of me in an interview."

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