

Making A Living To Make Art

Artists Buy Time To Paint Or Sculpt

Artist Lynn Schuette, foreground, subleases part of her 4,700-square-foot studio to dancers and experimental theater groups. Mural in background is her work. Schuette, who specializes in multimedia wall constructions, leased her "space," the former Trafalgar Club at Eighth and E, in July. Says she: "I hope some day that the building will pay for my time to do my art, equaling what I would earn for a normal job."

By NOLAN DAVIS

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The whir of a legal-office copying machine all but drowns out Ellen Irvine's soft voice as she discusses the temporary arrangement she has made with life.

"I have to earn a certain number of dollars a month to take care of myself and my two children," she said, feeding court orders, legal briefs and estate settlements to the machine.

"Sometimes I sell a painting or two and that takes care of it. The amount of time I spend in an office working depends upon how much money I have coming in from my art. The whole thing centers on my keeping my bills paid."

Irvine is among the painters, print-makers and sculptors here who are trying to pursue their art full-time. For all of them, the long-range struggle is the hunt for "space" — long walls on which, or within which, they can exhibit their works.

Their short-range struggle is a more universal one: the fight for daily bread.

To earn that, artists like Irvine work part time at jobs which are far afield from art, but buy them time to paint or sculpt. Others follow more conventional paths, becoming art teachers or support staffers for local art galleries.

The employment is as varied as the styles and outlooks of the artists themselves. Sculptor Mark Schweitzer works as a waiter. Painter Vince Torano drives a school bus. Sculptor Kenneth Capps of Carlsbad teaches and does odd jobs, including house-painting, fence-mending and "hole-digging." Painter-sculptor Richard Allen Morris clerks in a bookstore.

Richard Sigmund is an interior decorator and also operates two new-wave art galleries downtown.



— Staff photo by Cindy Lubke

Constructionist Lynn Schuette is a landlady or sorts, subleasing part of her massive inner-city studio space to dancers and experimental theater groups. Painter Susan Minnicks is employed as a grant-proposal writer.

Setting aside their artwork to report to "outside" jobs requires constant mental readjustment, the artists say. For some, the transition is easy.

"I feel I don't take on the identity of the job," said sculptor Capps. "I don't want the sense of permanence with outside work. The art work is permanent."

Torano said the kids he buses to and from school are entertaining, but that job essentially permits him to be less involved than if he was working in an office or factory.

"I paint every day," he said. "That's what I do. Everything else, in a sense, I do it, but I'm not present. There's nothing left for anything else because it all happens on the canvas."

For others, the switch from art to other work is more involving — often calling up curious — but artistic — responses.

Ellen Irvine wears what she calls a "false face" in the workaday world.

Sitting behind a neatly ordered desk at the law firm, she said, "That's sort of my trademark. It's very important for me to paint my face."

She was wearing a black knee-length skirt and pastel yellow blouse, very crisp, very business-worldly. Only the elaborate shadow system around her eyes hints at her real occupation.

"If I wasn't going to an office, I wouldn't dress this way," she said. "I'd just get up and pull on the same old pants for two weeks."

Lynn Schuette said a former job as a waitress had a curious effect.

"It drove me crazy when I found that half my life was spent in a costume acting (a role)," she said.

"One night, I went home and made a cardboard cutout of a waitress uniform with built-in pockets and waitress paraphernalia in the pockets. Then I made four more waitress-uniform cutouts, glued them together, and painted the fronts and backs. They even had 'food' splattered on them.

"The next day, I went in and interviewed all my fellow waitresses with a tape recorder. I showed the waitress cutouts in several shows and played the tapes in the shows. After that, I decided that there is no way you can make a living and separate it from making art."

She also quit the waitress job.

The biggest problem in doing other-than-art work, Schuette and other artists said, is salvaging time out of the day to paint or sculpt.