



JIL & JIMMY BAKER

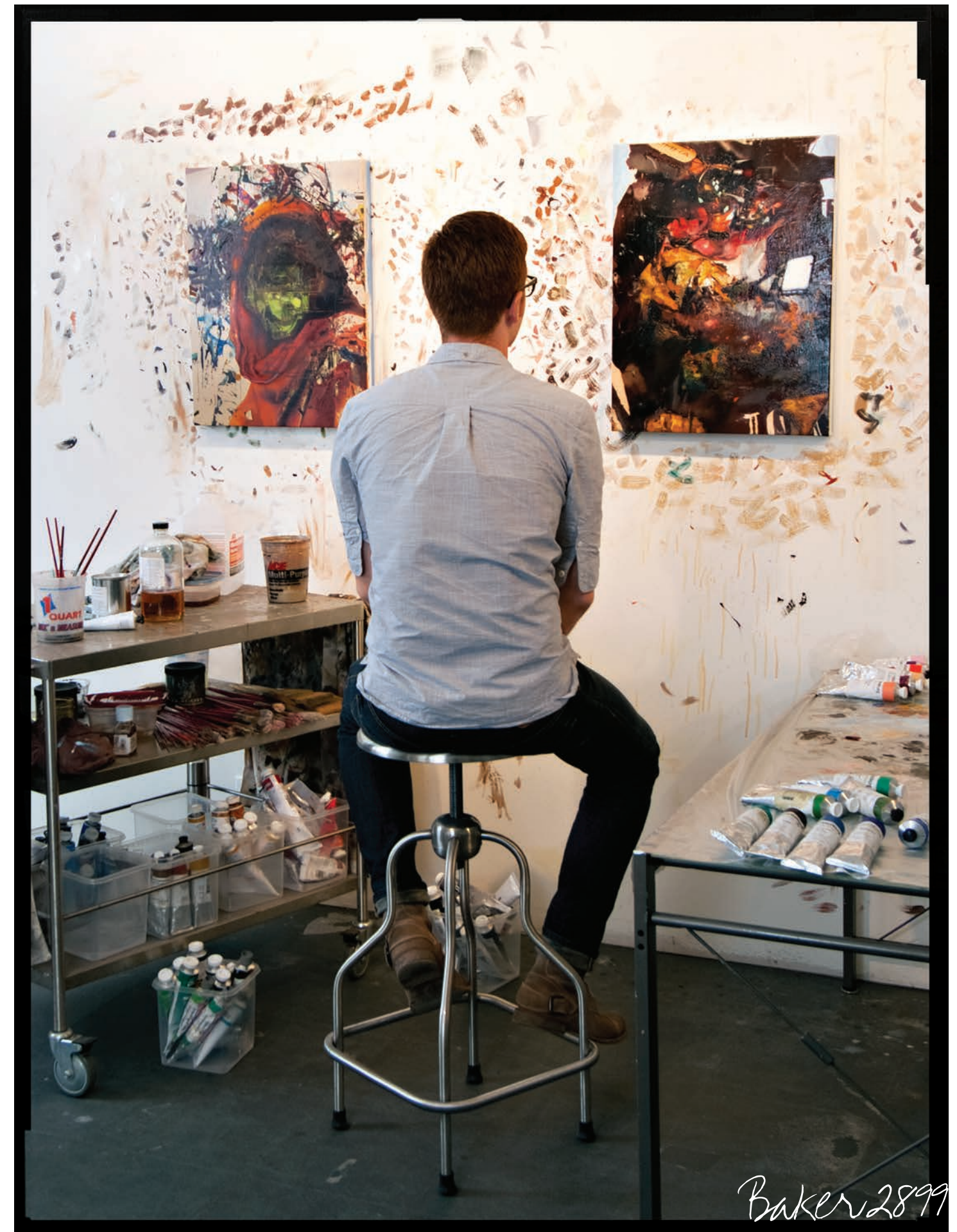
JIMMY
BAKER

IT'S KIND OF FUNNY TO HEAR
JIMMY BAKER SAY THAT TODAY'S

KIDS AREN'T MOTIVATED, THAT THEY AREN'T WILLING TO WORK HARD TO GET AHEAD, THAT IF THEY PLAN ON BEING SUCCESSFUL ARTISTS, WELL, FAT CHANCE IN HELL.

AT 31, HE DOESN'T STRIKE YOU AS A MAN WHO SOUNDS, OR THINKS, LIKE HE'S 61. HE IS JIMMY BAKER THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST, WHO SOME SAY MATURED WHEN MOST ARTISTS ARE BUT EMERGING. HE'S ALREADY HAD ART SHOWS IN NEW YORK CITY, IN LOS ANGELES, LONDON, IN PARIS, BASEL (SWITZERLAND), AND IN CINCINNATI'S CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, PLACES WHERE AN ARTIST NEEDS TO SHOW TO BE BIG. PLACES WHERE OPENING NIGHTS ARE IMPORTANT IF YOU WANT PEOPLE TO REMEMBER YOU, THE PEOPLE WHO WILL FOLLOW YOU SO THEY CAN FIGURE YOU OUT, YOUR RAISON D'ÊTRE.

STORY BY DOUGLAS EDWARD SANDHAGE
PHOTOS BY HELEN ADAMS





also plays drums in a punk-metal rock group; he listens to podcasts that some might think are weird. He sometimes thinks that perhaps our government, in a conspiratorial way, could have unclean motives.

Yet here he is, concerned about youth. Worrying that today’s students of art don’t have the right brain-stuff to make even a dent in the right direction.

Trying to explain Jimmy Baker is like trying to write a convincing story that Norman Rockwell and Picasso were brothers.

THERE IS JIMMY THE KID, who grew up in small town Dover, Ohio, where the annual football game between the Dover Tornadoes and Quakers of New Philadelphia is now more than a century old. He is the sole offspring of Dad, James, who taught himself html coding in the early 90s and built a career out of building websites; of Mom, Alesa, who went to art school for a time, had Jimmy, and then taught herself how to be an illustrator, adapting her work to rubber stamps and creating a cottage industry that even Martha Stewart would discover.

These were the kind of parents who encouraged him to be an artist – according to Jimmy, “it was a very permissive sort of existence” – that anything is possible if you work hard at it. The exact opposite of most artists who tell you that their parents told them that raising chickens would be more productive.

THERE IS JIMMY THE ARTIST, who hangs out most of every day in his studio, on the first floor of the home he and wife Jil renovated from near scratch just a few blocks from downtown Northside. He sees things the rest of us don’t, and paints things we often don’t get when we do see it.

EXPLAINING HIMSELF

Jimmy’s studio is but 50 feet away from the garage, which houses his next best friend after Jil and a fresh canvas, a 1974 Honda CB550 and his 2007 Triumph Thruxton 900. He gets “excited” when he rides, not offering anything further in fear that it would be a cliché.

It would be easy to quickly summarize here and say that somehow Jimmy’s life could be an adjunct or a sequel to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the bestselling classic book that everyone gives you when you get a motorized bike, not necessarily knowing that the book really isn’t anything about motorcycles. It’s about a father-and son trip that is punctuated by numerous philosophical discussions on topics including epistemology, ethical emotivism and the philosophy of science. You know, the kind of topics you would expect an artist like Jimmy to know about and to give his take on any of them.

I asked Jimmy if I could watch him paint, which, in and of itself, is not exactly easy to do. His paintings are kind of like putting together an erector set, adding Lincoln logs and Play-Doh. He terms the process “slamming disparate pieces” together.

Not all of Jimmy’s work follows the same process, but it essentially starts with a computer image or a composite of images. These get painted onto a canvas in much the old-fashioned way. But then layers of additional oil paint get applied over parts of the original, leaving only hints of its beginnings. You might see a portion of a fender that was an entire car, an arm that belonged to a body. “The photos are not incredibly obvious (when done); they’re not like sitting on the surface,” he says.

Then comes the novel part, what Jimmy says is a technique shared by only one other artist in the U.S. He takes the entire canvas, in sizes up to 6x9 feet, to a printing company where it is fed

into an ink-jet printer to apply more finishes and/or images. Once dry it’s taken back to the studio for even more applications, sandings and tweezer treatments (to pick out any stray dog hairs from his studio companion, Augustine, a toy fox terrier).

“It’s blending conventional aspects of oil on canvas with digital production. It’s taking a hand-made object and turning it into something a bit more disorienting,” says Jimmy. If you ever get the opportunity to see what Jimmy starts and what he ends up with, you can identify some original elements and the process makes sense. Google Jimmy and you’ll find a video that gives a few more insights about the process than I can offer here.

At some point Jimmy becomes satisfied that his followers, and those to become so, will be happy with his work and buy it in the four- to five-figure range.

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

“It is about taking, compiling, looking through archives, smashing all of these things together to create an image that hopefully speaks about a moment in time or an experience,” says Jimmy. “The process you have to go through in viewing it is almost like the process I go through in making it, but in reverse.

“It is about . . . getting people to . . . try to make sense out of these images. In the big picture some of these works are about sift-

ing through information, sorting through ideas and content that might not be clearly discernible or might not be easy to understand at first glance. I am trying to use that as a metaphor for the complexity of our existence at this point in time, while relating that to other aspects. (For example) what are our responsibilities to our democracy, our citizenship? What are all the things our country is involved in, all of these disparate moments and tensions?”

Perhaps Jimmy is talking about his students here; he is a teacher at the Art Academy of Cincinnati. Or maybe it’s about his and Jil’s decidedly big change in lifestyle – buying a house and fixing it up, a place to call their own in Northside, an area of Cincinnati where only the bold, until recent years, would stake a claim. They did tell us that neighbors looked at them askance when they bought their place, which previous owners and landlords only pretended to fix up to livable conditions. But in a democracy, we buy houses; it makes us better citizens in the long run.

Ah, but there’s more. “There might be images of public displays of violence, there might be aspects of a model, a starlet, or even just personal images of people’s vacations. It’s totally about smashing things together into a soup that you kind of have to untangle,” says Jimmy, adding that the materials in his pieces are, in themselves, worth the view. “You can get engaged with them in terms of the physical application of paint, the color, the composition. They

IN THE STUDIO



SNOW LEOPARDS

Jimmy Baker
Oil and UV ink on canvas
68" x 68"
2010
Photo by Tony Walsh



are hopefully made in such a way that sort of sucks you in, creates a hook for you to want to investigate.”

Jimmy’s studio is essentially white, 11-ft. walls with a concrete floor. There is no easel. He simply hangs a canvas on a wall or lays it on a table for painting. A rolling stainless steel cart holds his paints and brushes.

But what is going through his head when he paints?

Prior press for Jimmy tends to include that his work may depict conspiracies of one kind or another. Perhaps, but during Jimmy’s youth there wasn’t much talk about conspiracy theories, at least not when compared to the 1960s (who killed Kennedy? did we really land on the moon?). He says that the 90s were a “coming of age” time for him, and that “listening to a lot of underground music, a lot of it heavy-metal,” caused him to be critical of institutional power. “There was a sense of excitement and curiosity, all these aspects that are not very obvious to the everyday person,” he says.

“There might be buried moments of specificity in the work but I want the work to read as more of a cultural soup. There is no one direct or clear theory or idea,” Jimmy says. “For me the history of painting has two specific sort of courses, one of which (is that) it is always kind of inevitably documenting aspects of war and aspects of culture at large, changes, progressions, things like that.

“The other half of that is this very personal, intense dialogue. You move into abstraction, you move into early 20th century modernism. It’s about personal aesthetic values,” he adds. “I try to be pretty good about knowing what is realistic, that people can sort of engage, so I guess I kind of look at my paintings as a sort of blending of those two modes. I’m trying to record my moment in history as I see it and at the same time bring my personal dialogue and relationship to this progression of the medium. I am bringing in aspects of digital manipulation and digital imagery, printing and processes. That is nothing wild and new, and that’s also why I am trying to bury it into the work. I’m not out there screaming, saying ‘Hey, I’ve got this breakthrough process.’ I want that to be almost something you think about afterward. It’s not at the surface of the discussion.

“That’s how I look at my paintings,” he adds. “There is no direct, black-and-white meaning or any clear logic or relationship to any, say difficult subject matters that I’m pulling from. It’s more about the confusion and struggle of trying to piece together any sense of truth in a larger sort of philosophical sense, because that doesn’t really exist.”

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Q “Was there a moment, a spark, something that said, “Jimmy, you must create the kind of art you are about to do”?

A “It all came from a 1990s sense of general distrust of power. A lot of stuff was very political, charged, and aggressive towards power. That created new avenues of exploration. But, there was no glaring moment.

“Since then it’s just been basically an investigation of the marvel of democracy, feeling like, if I’m going to be a part of this country and pay taxes, be a citizen, even as much as I have very contradictory ideas to a lot of things that happen, to be responsible, you have to be engaged . . . No matter if it is something that’s happening down the street or something that is happening halfway across the world it is still an extension of your citizenship. It’s easy for people to just turn off, not pay attention to things.

“There is no one truth. It’s just about finding as many vantage points possible to give it your best judgment.

“I am always fascinated by people who are able to break down massive amounts of information, to sift through it, to draw connections to all that stuff . . . There is definitely tangible subject matter in my work and things that it is about, but at the same time I feel that what it’s really doing is sort of talking about this conduit of information. It’s always about that structure of information and how we get it, how we manipulate it and transform, repackaging, and give it back to you. That comes back to all that autobiography I’ve talked about, my parents and family, these kind of innocent survivalists, sort of the DIY people who have a relationship to information at a time when this little kernel of a digital culture is just starting to explode.”

DOVER HERE. DOVER THERE

If Jimmy were to go back to a Dover high school reunion, and somebody were to hang his paintings on the wall, would anyone recognize Jimmy as the creator? Dover, he says, is “God-fearing, sports-loving, middle America surrounded by Amish country.”

Jimmy doubts anyone would make the connection, but then he didn’t exactly hang out at the school lockers and talk about corn crops. He had friends in other cities, and once he found life in a drum set in punk-rock time, it was the perfect opportunity to tour the country, twice, with his band.

While earlier we said that Jimmy’s parents supported his near every move, his Mom wasn’t overly keen about this part of his life. She worked hard to help put him through college, the same art school she once attended. But Jimmy didn’t disappoint; he graduated summa cum laude from Columbus College of Art & Design in 2002, finishing at UC two years later with a master’s of fine art in painting.

His first break came just after graduation. He got a call from a New York gallery saying someone had dropped out of a group show and would he like to take the spot. It was the start of his commercial career.

Over the last seven years he’s been in and out of shows, exhibiting both paintings and mixed media (check out his website to see more). He also accepted a part-time teaching position at the Art Academy of Cincinnati; he teaches two to three classes per semester. “It’s a nice excuse to get out of the studio and have some different experiences, new directions, and to learn to take your own advice sometimes,” says Jimmy.

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

Jimmy says there are three phases to the lives of most artists: emerging, mid-career, and established. He emerged quickly and feels that he is now somewhere in that middle stage, which means he needs to build on what he has done, yet play around the edges, to dig deeper into himself.

He also wants to enjoy his motorcycle more, particularly now that Jil has her own and they can ride together, yet separately. Come to find out, she didn’t like riding on the back, and he didn’t like it either. (Another funny thing about Jimmy: He took a motorcycle safety course, another example of how he both embodies and defies the persona of the free-spirited artist).

“I am moving much more toward that personal end of the spectrum, more like abstract end of the spectrum,” says Jimmy. “I don’t know if that comes from a hopelessness or disillusionment toward these more straightforward analytical topics, but I think it’s probably a natural progression.”

He has, he feels, learned a lot from being an artist. Not just in what he sees to paint, but in the practical matters of life. For example, “I could build a house from scratch if I wanted to,” he says. Much of what you see in their house was done by him, self-taught, kind of the same way he and his Dad used to build websites without formal training. “It definitely comes from putting in thousands of hours, working my ass off and figuring out things,” certainly not due to any entitlement. “I was always going to be my own boss, to go my own way.”



AUGUSTINE

Surprisingly, Jimmy says that if he had a teenage son who said he wanted to be an artist, he would probably not be encouraging. “It’s a hard life, but it is incredibly rewarding. I am so much happier doing this than anything else. This is sort of the ultimate ‘put yourself on the line.’ It seems kind of wild and egotistical, and at times it is terrifying. You are on your own.

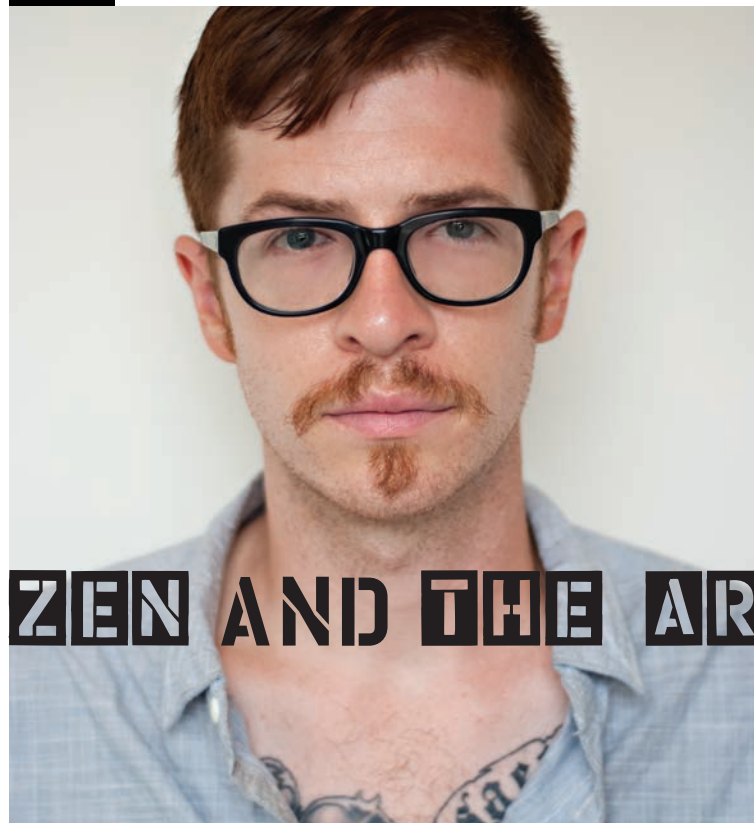
“When things are good, they are incredibly good,” says Jimmy, noting that pieces from artists at his level of connectivity can fetch in the \$5,000 to \$25,000 range. But, he adds, it isn’t just the art; successful artists also have to have people skills. “You can’t be afraid to get your work out there. It’s mostly about personal relationships. I’ve really been fortunate enough that I’ve had a bunch of shows all over the world, but you have to keep moving. You can’t stay stagnant.

“I’ve never been terribly afraid of trying anything,” he says.

Jil confirms Jimmy’s go-get-it-now approach. “You have a remarkable, I don’t want to say lucky streak, but in the first five years of our marriage, and even before that, you would set a goal for yourself nearly every year and it was amazing that within that year everything would fall in line and it would happen. It would be like, ‘I want to have a museum show before I’m 35.’ The CAC (Contemporary Arts Center) calls and says, ‘do you want to have a show?’ I’m like, how is it that it just seems so natural? It is certainly like he’s working hard, but it’s not banging your head against the wall.”

“I have been incredibly fortunate to have the skills, a good work ethic, being able to pitch my work, and have people be receptive,” says Jimmy. ■

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT JIMMY BAKER? GO TO: WWW.JIMMYBAKER.COM



ZEN AND THE ART OF JIMMY & JIL



AT HOME

Jimmy and Jil. Sounds like a great beginning for a children’s book, a nursery rhyme, or a fairy tale.

Both in their early 30s, they are already enmeshed in a story line that could be the beginning of a good book, perhaps *Zen* being in the title.

Jimmy Baker is a contemporary artist, a vocation that few ever break into successfully, at least on a national or international scale. Jil (one “I”) Baker is a Fairfield girl who, since their college days, fell in and out of love with Jimmy, but hung with him, and as an architectural designer, she has designed their home in Northside, one that made a showpiece out of a demolition derby.

Together they ride motorcycles. Together they’ve been to art shows in Paris, New York, London and Los Angeles where only the best get shown – and bought.

LIVING IN NORTHSIDE

Someone told Jimmy that Northside was the “in” place to be, the place a single guy or a couple could lay down roots, the place where an artist, particularly when young and usually not flush with cash, could have some space for a studio and a room for band practice. He moved there in 2004 after graduating from UC, renting a 2,500 sq. ft. warehouse space with four concrete walls above a business named Visionaries and Voices. Jil moved in after they got married and the low-rent allowed them to fix up the place and get some home-improvement-type experiences.

Jump to 2009. It was time to move on and upon the advice of their real estate agent, they drove past a place

less than a mile that had all the trappings of what they wanted. Yeah, it needed work, but it was dirt-cheap.

The operative word here is “drove.” They did not venture inside, but decided to purchase the 2,600 sq. ft. home on exterior looks alone. Jimmy calls the style Mid-Century simplicity mixed with Shaker sensibility.

Did their family and friends call them crazy?

The word “insane” did come up a time or two. Even their new neighbors thought something was up. “People were sitting on their porches saying, ‘What are you doing,?’” says Jil. “It needed a lot of work to be occupied.”

The twosome combined their professional skills, added a dose of their “can-do” attitude and soon produced the designs to get started. Jil is an architectural designer for Michael Schuster & Associates (MSA Architects), a downtown firm with numerous big-ticket projects under its belt.

Jil’s parents graduated from UC and would often visit downtown Cincinnati to take her and her younger brother to cultural events, museums and restaurants. She always liked downtown, but until she landed her job with MSA, had little knowledge of the new frontiers, Northside and Over-the-Rhine. She is a graduate in Fine Arts from the College of Art & Design in Columbus (where she met Jimmy), and has her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Architecture from UC.

In designing the home, Jil said that she and Jimmy wanted “to open it up, but still retain some of the original materials and character of the area. We didn’t want to introduce anything too unusual or foreign with materials; it was more about the geometry and spatial character of the building.”

For sure, everything in the home belongs and exudes quality. “I

You can't argue Jil's assertion that putting the kitchen on the second floor of their Northside home is "unconventional." But she has good reasons, mainly that "this social gathering place" permitted more light into the room, that it gave them a better view of the neighborhood, and because this particular room in the home had "grand volume" – the ceilings are 14 ½ ft. Also on this floor is the master bedroom, bath, a deck and laundry room. Jil loves to cook, especially using ingredients that are in-season. The Faris McReynolds painting is a recent purchase from a gallery in Los Angeles. Jil says the paint above the cabinetry is "about as dark as you can go on the gray scale," but that at night or due to a glow from the chandelier, "no matter the time of day, it changes colors." Flowers by Jones the Florist.





What do you get when you put a contemporary artist with an architectural designer with a home that needs plenty of work? You get space, you get light, you get clean lines, you get a showplace. When Jil and Jimmy Baker first saw their 1900s-built, multi-family home in Northside, some could say it needed the wrecking ball. "It had a checkered history," says Jil. Instead, they gutted the inside, added minimal walls, and fixed the holes in the roof. The two-story house faces east so morning light is aplenty. The new floor is bamboo.

The custom-made staircase in the two-story Baker home started with a steel fabricator in Northside building the risers and posts. Jil and Jimmy added their creative touch by cutting and staining the oak for the treads.



Clutter isn't in the vocabulary of Jil and Jimmy Baker. Even the custom-built (by Jimmy) wall behind the headboard in the master bedroom includes a pull-out cabinet to hold linens. The bed is from Crate & Barrel.



Jil Baker, an architectural designer with Michael Schuster & Associates (MSA Architects), and who, like Jimmy, has a fine arts degree from the College of Art & Design in Columbus, served as the interior designer for their home in Northside; Jimmy was the project foreman. The first-floor family room is "our one little cozy spot, more intimate with our bookshelves and personal objects." The book inventory includes all things art and architecture, but also works of fiction and philosophy.

like buying home stuff more than I like buying shoes,” says Jil. “It’s a quest to find the right thing,” and to be reasonably sure it will be timeless for future projects.

Jimmy and Jil’s neighbors are over their original suspicions and now everyone feels at home. Jimmy’s band practices in the basement storage room, which helps to muffle the blasts from within to without.

“It has become more of a family neighborhood,” Jil says, talking about all of Northside. “You see more people walking, with their strollers, with their dogs, raising kids. We can walk and get anything we want.”

JIL AND HER MOTORCYCLE

Jimmy and Jil have ridden motorcycles since they met, in the traditional way, Jimmy in front, Jil on back. But it wasn’t until recently that both discovered each other’s dislike for that traditional riding style, so Jil bought a 1973 Honda CB350. Neither of their bikes is suitable for long-distance, so the perfect weekend get-a-way for them is down to Rabbit Hash in Kentucky, or north to see bands play in Columbus.

“It’s a fun, communal thing for us to do together,” says Jil, adding that sometimes they ride with a dozen or so friends. She also loves to cook nearly every weeknight, and thinks it is therapeutic. “I come home from work, change, and start cooking. It’s a great way to enjoy your house, that’s for sure.”

Both say that despite having similar schooling and interests in art, and the notion that two artists does not a marriage make, they do quite well together thank you. “It works because we learn off each other,” says Jimmy.

Not to say that they aren’t critical of each other, but it’s more of a “general, on-going critique of what we are observing,” say Jil. “But with a sense of humor. We are able to laugh at things. Neither of us are afraid we’ll hurt each other’s feelings. We just don’t take those things personally.”

And then maybe it’s just because Jimmy is Jimmy. Between his conspiracy-based theories about power, and his being a punk-metal rocker, he really appears to be a down-to-earth sort of guy. He writes songs, with real words. He says please and thank you. He admits that some artists can be “pretentious, hard to get along with,” but that most of his clients like him because he is “easy to get along with,” he says.

Back to Northside, Jimmy and Jil see it as their town, perhaps living here forever in this first house of their own. They both like the fact that some neighbors are raising goats and chickens, and have their own vegetable gardens. “Maybe it isn’t as safe as we grew up with (her hometown of Fairfield),” but it’s getting more so by the day says Jil.

But they are also concerned about the community’s discoverability factor. “There is a history in the development of communities in relationship to artists,” says Jimmy, noting that it is the artists who move in when things are rough, then after they help build it, the corporations start buying up properties causing the “artists to have to move out and find another destitute place.”

A conspiratorial theory we hope won’t come true. ■



The couple that rides together stays together, but not necessarily anymore on the same bike (i.e., man on front; female on back). Jil now rides her own 1973 Honda CB350 and says she even knows about motorcycle maintenance. “I’ve been known to solve a problem or two sometime,” she says. Jimmy’s bikes include a 1974 Honda CB550 and a 2007 Triumph Thruxton 900. 2008 statistics shows that female motorcycle owners were 12.8 percent of the total owner population.