

CHICAGO JOURNAL

Volume 2, No. 33 ■ Thursday, May 30, 2002

After giving a go to three earlier careers, Kozan Studios' owner chucked it all and hacked out a niche in custom art



Photo by Eric Fogleman

In Kozan Studios' ground-floor shop, John Zoltek saws a few final planks for a pair of custom-ordered stage sets to be used in promoting a new video game.

Make no small plans

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON

Staff Writer

For Kathy Kozan, there never was a plan B. Truth be told, there never was a plan.

"In high school, the nuns said, you have to have something to fall back on," Kozan said, sipping a Coke in the kitchen of her office that's part workshop, part funhouse, and part museum. At her feet lay Shiloh, a gentle giant of a German shepherd Kozan rescued from an abusive owner years ago. "But now I say, 'If you have something to fall back on, you'll fall back. If you want something, go after it.'"

Kozan knows what she's talking about. She's passed up a few safety nets on her meandering path toward an artistic livelihood, business own-

ership, and bossing around some 15 guys laboring downstairs with hammers and paintbrushes and electric saws. A degree in painting was the first risk. Then, rejecting the cushioned womb of the gallery scene, which seemed too political, too inbred. For a while, Kozan found security in teaching art, but it, too, fell by the wayside.

Then, 20 years ago, Kozan bought a broken-down Victorian house at 1421 W. Hood in Edgewater. She spent the next seven years rehabbing it all by herself. (A stack of round-edged snapshots taken by Kozan's brother document the solitary exertion; they show a younger, wispy-haired Kozan standing alone amid the rubble of a living room, a bathroom, a kitchen.) Kozan stripped wallpaper and wood paneling, rewired whole rooms, installed new fixtures, new plumb-

ing, new floors. The scaffolding out front saw Christmas come and go, so Kozan strung a few lights across its frame. And then, when it was all over, she sold the house and scraped enough together to launch Kozan Studios, the custom art business that had been brewing for a while. Since then, Kozan has been painting murals and trompe l'oeils, building props and artsy furniture, and constructing the occasional life-size video game set for a living. And as her clientele has grown, so has her payroll.

"Selling that house broke my heart and it didn't," Kozan said. "You have to give up something to go to the next step. But I thought they would carry me out feet first. I thought I would be there forever."

See KOZAN STUDIOS on Page 8



Artist and West Loop proprietor Kathy Kozan, with Shiloh.

Photo by Eric Fogleman

KOZAN STUDIOS

Continued from page 1

"Those were lean times, and the artists got paid when I got paid," she said. "Poverty doesn't mean purity. If you're professional and you charge people for what you do, it's important."

Ten years ago, Kozan set up shop in a three-story West Loop building tucked under the Lake Street el just west of Halsted. Now it's a brightly painted brick studio walled with windows. But when Kozan first arrived, having bought the former warehouse with no money down, she said, there was no heat, and the only toilet was a portable one. The windows were boarded up. Vagrants lurked outside.

"Sometimes, life takes you on a journey and you don't even know where you're going," Kozan said. "The best jobs are not the ones you find, but the ones you make. ... People get jobs by creating the need for that. People come to you and say, 'You're so lucky to be an artist.' Luck does not have a damn thing to do with it. You make choices."

On a Thursday morning earlier this month, Kozan and her crew were rushing to finish the job that had consumed them, day and often night, for the better part of three weeks: a series of 24-foot Tomb Raider and Hit Man video game sets destined for a manufacturers' convention in California.

"It's always feast or famine," said Kozan, whose recent projects included a set of custom-made chairs for Suite Home Chicago. To fatten out the famine between commissions, she's launching a Web site to sell murals and decorative arts to ordinary Internet browsers.

On the second floor, Bob Gadomski—an accomplished muralist himself, an artist like many in Kozan's employ—was busy with a paintbrush and a bucket of something thick and brown, making long Styrofoam slabs look like rough-hewn logs.

Nearby, Eric Richardson dirtied up a beige wall with a little gray paint. One story below, others were still sawing bits of wood, fitting the pieces together—including a faux dead body—and packing them in trucks.

Climbing into the back with a paintbrush, Jane Ferris added a few finishing touches. And Shiloh made the rounds, hopping aboard the freight elevator whenever it made a trip, hoping somebody might throw a ball.

"Here, it's always a different thing," said shop manager Kirk Bruhns—"Captain Kirk" to his crew. "It's never the same thing twice."

A set builder for commercial photography studios for 25 years—"I never do residential, never go into people's homes," he said—Bruhns surveyed the monthlong effort about to be packed and shipped and gone forever.

"It's a lot of energy," he said. "This stuff will be in a landfill somewhere in L.A. It took me a long time to get used to that part of the business."

"We get all kinds of different work, from museums to children's bedrooms or bars and clubs," said Richardson, who claims airbrushing as his true forte. "It's something different every time. If I've never seen it before, I'll sit down and think a couple minutes and then attack it."

Once upon a time, Gadomski himself was an art teacher, and then an artist-in-residence at a city high school, he said, giving his Styrofoam log a few final strokes with a brush. But it took too much time and energy away from painting.

"I'm a fine artist, not a commercial artist," said Gadomski. A few years back, he sold a few paintings to McDonald's, but they were slashed by a knife-wielding disgruntled employee. "There's a real diversity of projects here, always new carpenters, new painters coming in. And when you learn something, you can always use it somewhere down the line here."