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**PAUL SCHIMMEL • ANNE COLLIER • 2014 TOP TEN
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Colin Chillag IN HIS STUDIO

BELOW:

"CIRCLE K DAWN," 2013

OIL ON PANEL, 17" X 23"

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 101/EXHIBIT

Like a writer who knows what's best left unsaid, Colin Chillag understands what's best left unpainted. Negative space eloquently informs his work, providing contrast to the hyperrealism of the images. And although he might say his subjects are ordinary people captured in mundane scenes, his carefully thought-out works exhibit a haunting sense of verisimilitude.

Chillag's works are ringing true to an increasing number of admirers within the art world these days, after many years of off-and-on regional recognition from his home base of Phoenix, 2014 turned out to be a banner year. He recently added the University of Arizona in Tucson to the list of museums that include his work in their permanent collections. In May and June, he was the subject of a solo show at the Phoenix Art Museum, thanks to a mid-career grant from Contemporary Forum, one of the museum's support organizations. In September, he became one of four Arizona artists represented in the much-publicized "State of the Art" exhibition at Crystal Bridges in Bentonville, Arkansas (through January 19). As the year came to an end, Chillag was busy preparing works for his solo show at 101/exhibit in Los Angeles, which has represented him since 2012. Add to all that a personal milestone—he got married in late November.

Born in Syracuse, NY, and spending most of his childhood in Phoenix, Chillag, 43, studied at the San Francisco Art Institute, then took odd jobs around the West to support himself. By the early 2000s, determined to make a living from painting, he moved into a modest 1930s-era home in Phoenix's historic Garfield District,



and set up his studio. The home's sitting room—bathed in Arizona sunlight—is lined with finished and unfinished canvases. Given his oeuvre, and his tendency to leave portions of a work seemingly incomplete, it's not always evident which are which. Chillag says he will work on a painting intensively for a month or so, and let his thoughts about it percolate for a while, then refine it in small bursts as needed.

"I have to be real conscious of 'I'm doing this area today,' " Chillag says in describing his non-linear approach. "But I also know that the areas need to match up and have the same kind of energy—to be consistent and focused."

Chillag's subject matter is consistently non-political and slice-of-life, often deriving from interactions with friends and glimpses of urban and rural landscapes. His works focus on his idiosyncratic and nuanced depictions of everyday faces and places. Yet the resulting paintings require viewers to delve into their poignancy and resonance, then come to their own conclusions. *Jenna Drinking* (2013-14) shows a woman with long blond hair and sunglasses, paused amid the high-noon menagerie of folks at the Arizona State Fair to drink from a water bottle. She is of the crowd, yet set apart from it. On either side of her are abstracted arrays of color swatches on blank canvas, as if the artist used them as hash marks to record time. In *Poolside Hoffberger* (2013-14), done in oil on panel, a genial-looking guy with a beard sits shirtless in the backyard sun, evoking both familiarity and ambiguity. Even Circle K convenience stores, as ubiquitous as they are, are the stuff of contemplation through Chillag's canvases.

Chillag's creative process is refreshingly open, with viewers acting as interlopers. He says journals are not his thing and that he would much rather organize his thoughts—in the form of pigment tests, penciled outlines, seemingly errant brushstrokes, daily schedules, ironic phrases, meditative quotes, even wedding reception ideas—on the canvases themselves. Such "notes" usually stay in the paintings, he says, not because he wants to come across as self-obsessed but because they add a kind of transparency and honesty.

"Some of the artists I admire most are those who work from a model or from a view of a landscape," Chillag says, counting Lucian Freud, Ellen Altfest, Alice Neel and Avigdor Arikha among his influences. In addition, he realizes he is often more inspired by the sketches and studies in the portfolios of old masters than the finished masterpieces. "It's that kind of approach, a more investigative kind of thing, rather than executing a predetermined plan," Chillag says. "I just enjoy that more."

—DEBORAH ROSS

Colin Chillag will have a solo show at 101/exhibit, on Meirose Avenue, in Los Angeles. From February 28 to April 18, 2015. www.101exhibit.com

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