Transforming chaos into beauty

Carmel's Artists

By DENNIS TAYLOR

BEKAH BULL somehow sparkles as she shares a horrifying tale of unspeakable physical pain, an ordeal she interprets, by choice, through paintings imbued with optimism, fluorescent color and light — even as her body presents every opportunity to dwell in darkness.

Bull was 26 years old in 2012 when she severely damaged her spine during a gym workout, an injury that resulted in temporary paralysis and reliance from 2012 to 2019 upon, at various times, a wheelchair, walker, cane and stabilizing foot brace.

She subsequently developed a related problem — complex regional pain syndrome, or CRPS — a malady ranked No. 1 on the McGill Pain Scale, which is widely used in clinical and research settings.

'Most painful condition'

That affliction — "the most painful condition known to humankind," according to McGill University researchers — still affects her, she said.

And CRPS is merely one side effect stemming from the original injury.

Over the years, Bull has been treated for cystic lesions, cellulitis and osteomyelitis. She has endured two spinal surgeries and one on her ankle. Her colon and bladder are permanently paralyzed.

"I had to get a colostomy last year because of my nerve damage," she said. And her immune system has been compromised: She is battling her 18th infection of 2026.

While those physical issues are largely beyond her control, the artist uses her mind as a self-help tool.

"It affects my work a lot in the sense that I try to take that pain and the struggles and the chaos of life and turn them into something light-filled and beautiful through my art," said Bull, whose stunning mixed-media abstract pieces are on exhibit at Meuse Gallery (Ocean Avenue and Monte Verde Street in Carmel) and can also be seen at her own space, High Flow Gallery on Dolores Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues (next to Toro Sushi), where business hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily and a grand opening will be scheduled soon.

Health issues aside, Bull is living her dream life in Carmel, where, since 2019, she has resided in a second-floor apartment on Ocean Avenue with fellow abstract artist Jason Kurzer — who goes by "Kurz" — her partner in business and life.

A historic dwelling

That apartment is a big part of the magic for Bull and Kurz. Eight decades ago, Salvador Dalí purportedly rented it. The well-known Spanish surrealist was also a 1940s-era Monterey Peninsula artist and an early member of the Carmel Art Association.

The current occupants paint outdoors on two decks adjoining the apartment, one with a view of Monterey Bay.

"I feel very inspired by Dalí's energy when I'm painting here," said Bull. She celebrated her 40th birthday in February with a Dalí-themed party, for which all guests dressed in surrealist costumes.



PHOTO/COURTESY BEKAH BULL

Carmel artist Bekah Bull resides with fellow artist Kurz in an Ocean Avenue apartment once occupied by Salvador Dali. She dyed her hair blue in February for her surrealistic, Dali-themed birthday party.

Bekah Bull might have been destined to become an artist.

Her father, British-born painter Simon Bull — owner of Meuse Galleries in Carmel, St. Helena and Aspen, Colorado — is internationally acclaimed, with a career spanning more than four decades.

He was introduced to Carmel-by-the-Sea by Thomas Kinkade, opened a gallery in the Barnyard shopping center in 2000 and moved into a home near Scenic Drive in 2003.

In 2000, he won the British Fine Art Trade Guild's Artist Print Award as the top-selling original print artist in Great Britain. In 2002, Bull was selected, along with Kinkade and Howard Behrens, to create artwork commemorating the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

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In 2003, he became the first British artist to win the U.S. National Association of Limited Edition Dealers Award for his print, "The Journey Never Ends," and he won again in 2004 for "Bird of Paradise." That same year, he was honored with the association's Medal of Honor for artistic services to the limited-edition industry.

Meeting Muhammad Ali

In 2007, he was one of several artists commissioned to create a series of paintings celebrating the life of heavyweight boxing legend Muhammad Ali.

"We were invited to visit Ali at his house in Scottsdale," remembered Bekah, 21 at the time. "He already had Parkinson's and couldn't really speak to me, but I'll never forget when he shook my hand.

"He stared right into my eyes, like he was examining the depths of my soul," she said. "I still get goose pimples, because I understood that that was his way of saying, 'I can't say anything to you … but I see you.'"

In England, the Bulls raised daughters Bekah and Kathryn ("Kat") in a farmhouse built in 1770 with several barns, all of which Simon converted into art studios.

"I'd come home from school every day and paint. It was a very cool experience," Bekah remembered. "I was probably around 8 when somebody bought one of my paintings, and one of my dad's clients became my first collector when I was a teenager. She'd buy my works on a regular basis."

In July 2003, at 17, Bekah moved to Carmel Valley, managed her father's gallery in the Barnyard for a year, then enrolled at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, where she studied for a year and a half with plans to become a fashion photographer.

She ultimately decided photography wasn't her thing, but in 2005, at 19, she landed a job in the fashion industry and moved to downtown Los Angeles, where she met Kurz. They bonded over art and the writings of Charles Bukowski, whose poetry and philosophies still influence her.

"We were just really good friends for about 10 years, then ended up getting together in 2016. We've been together ever since," she said.

Shanghai, India, Nepal

In 2010, during an economic downturn, Bull was laid off from her wholesale fashion job, and during the next five years she split time between Carmel and Shanghai, where she visited relatives, taught English and explored the city on her bicycle.

"I did a lot of traveling in Asia and Southeast Asia, loved the people, the food, the fashion … everything about it," she said. "I saw buildings that were thousands of years old standing next to some of the tallest buildings in the world, which was pretty amazing."

Despite the devastating spinal injury in 2012, she seized an opportunity to travel solo through India by train, "a life-changing experience," she said, during which she spent time in Nepal and took a scenic plane ride over Mount Everest.

After moving with Kurz to Aspen, St. Helena and, in 2019, to Carmel, Bull discovered that painting could be therapeutic and healing.

"My art is alchemy. I transform life's grit into vibrant beauty, wiring the darkness into electric light," she wrote in an artist's statement.

In Carmel, art became a full-time passion for Bull, who draws inspiration from a line of Bukowski poetry: "Unless it comes out of your soul like a rocket, unless the sun inside you is burning your gut, don't do it."

She feels the sun burning and rides the rocket every day.

"I can't stop painting now," Bull said. "I live, breathe, sleep, do everything for art."

Visit Meuse Gallery on Ocean Avenue (10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday through Saturday) to see art by Bekah and Simon Bull, Kurz, Erin Lee Gafill, Amy Donaldson and Banksy. View images of their paintings at meusegallery.com.

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