

Artist is keeping a venerable art form alive

Silhouettes are making a comeback

BY BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — To say that Karl Johnson is handy with a pair of scissors is like saying Russell Wilson has a passing affinity with the pig-skin.

Or that Daenerys Targaryen enjoys showing off her stable of dragons to her scores of enemies.

Johnson, as you might surmise, can snip up, down and all around a piece of white paper better than just about anyone in America. So, why is that noteworthy, you might ask?

He's certainly not a household name, but the Southern California resident is famous in certain circles for what he creates from his precise paper clippings: silhouette art. And Johnson has generated a group of fans that include some of the entertainment industry's top names and standouts in the political arena.

He's one of just a handful of artists in the United States who still are in the business of creating silhouettes, familiar to some who might remember seeing a small, stark black-and-white paper profile — or silhouette — of a young child, framed and hanging on the wall at a relative's home.

It's an artistic style that originated in 18th century Europe and colonial America, and was popular with common folk at the time who couldn't afford to dress their homes with expensive oil or watercolor paintings. The technique was named after Etienne de



Bob Smith | Independent

Silhouette artist Karl Johnson creates a portrait of 11-month-old Gabriel Miller, who sits in the lap of his mother, Carly.

Silhouette, France's treasury minister in 1716, known as a tightwad who gained notoriety by taxing citizens for their external signs of wealth — such as oil paintings.

While silhouettes were all the rage in the 18th century, something called the calotype process emerged in 1841, in which paper coated with silver iodide was introduced to the world. It advanced the photographic process by making photography that produced clearer results and easier to use. Not surprisingly, people began turning to photography for family portraits instead of using silhouettes.

Flash forward to the 21st century, though, and you'll find Johnson and maybe a

half-dozen other artists who continue to make a full-time living by cutting silhouette art for a niche market of people who appreciate their intricate, delicate appearance. Johnson, who began producing the artwork professionally in 1986, says he takes his scissors, paper and skills on the road about 75 days a year and cuts, on average, 100 silhouettes a day.

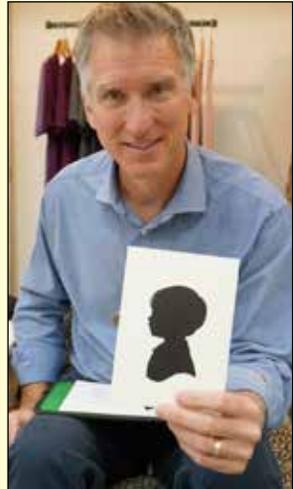
The master artist visited Port Orchard last week and held court at GiGi's Emporium PNW, a women's boutique store on Bay Street, where customers arrived with babies and young children in tow to have their profiles cut in the inimitable silhouette style.

Carly Miller traveled from Bremerton with her



Bob Smith | Independent

Above: Johnson's work in progress. Right: Johnson displays his most recent silhouette creation.



11-month-old baby, Gabriel, to have his portrait done by Johnson, who she follows on Instagram. She placed Gabriel on her lap faced perpendicular

to the artist.

"You got to do it in 90 seconds or less, or the kids are gone," the artist laughed as his scissors made quick zig-zag, up-and-down motions in its quest to capture the baby's delicate facial outline.

It'd be a bad pun otherwise, but Johnson has a particular eye for his craft: he was born blind in one eye, which interestingly gives him a two-dimensional vision view of a sharp shadow of a subject's facial outline.

As is the case with babies, their penchant for squirms and unchoreographed head-turns can make a portrait sitting a bit of a challenge for an artist. But Johnson just shrugged at the notion. He said he's had lots of practice over the years. His father was a silhouette artist who passed along the technique to him.

"What do you do for a living?"

It's not that Johnson hoped to carve out a living cutting silhouettes.

"It's not taught anywhere," he said. "Every generation loses more artists. Imagine a kid who says, 'Oh, mom, I'm going to play the glockenspiel one day' — or, 'I'm going to be a silhouette artist one day.'"

Johnson's foray into the niche art form took shape, somewhat incidentally, when he was "a starving art student" and got work at the Dollywood family amusement park in Tennessee. He's been busy with his scissors ever since.

Johnson said silhouette art is making something of a comeback around the country, fueled in part by Hollywood celebrities who regularly hire Johnson to create portraits at their birthday parties, weddings and special celebrations.

His clientele list includes Reese Witherspoon, who met Johnson when he was working at a wedding reception, Drew Barrymore, Steven Spielberg, Scarlett Johansson, Oprah Winfrey and Mayim Bialik, among other well-known stars. And their entertaining events, highlighted by Johnson's silhouette portraiture, have been chronicled in publications such as People, Oprah's magazine, USA Today and Martha Stewart Wedding.

Even uber-ent J-Lo — Jennifer Lopez — was surprised and "bowed over" by having Johnson do her portrait at a birthday bash arranged by her then-husband, entertainer Marc Anthony. And after Witherspoon was handed her own portrait, she told Johnson, "This is the coolest thing ever."

Danielle Gilchrist, who owns GiGi's Emporium PNW, said she was lucky to get on Johnson's schedule, which is usually booked solid. This was his first event in Port Orchard she said.

"We are excited to have Karl with us and provide an opportunity for families in our area to have a memorable keepsake that can be passed down from generation to generation," she said.

Gilchrist's family-owned business, which has a sister store in North Carolina, only recently moved to its current Bay Street space almost a year ago, where she said a children's section was added to accommodate an expanded line of moderately priced clothing. But in October, Gilchrist said they'll pack up again for another move, this time down the street to a larger, more visible location at 738 Bay St.

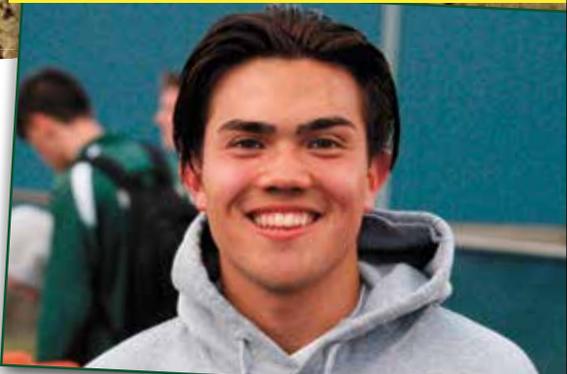
In addition to clothing, GiGi's Emporium also sells handcrafted items by artisans, including jewelry. She said almost all of the merchandise costs under \$50.

Athlete

Of The Week

William Stewart

Klahowya Secondary School



Proudly sponsored by:



William Stewart was one of the heroes for the Klahowya boys soccer team in its 1A state tournament first round match. Stewart scored a hat trick, powering his team to a 5-1 victory over Forks. He opened the scoring 25 minutes into the match by taking a pass from teammate Oscar Peterson off a throw in and hitting the back of the net from close range. Stewart then scored on a breakaway late in the first half and completed his big night with 15 minutes to go in the game off a pass from teammate Drew Dickson. The junior midfielder has come up big for his team before. Stewart scored a key goal last year in a 3-0 win over Coupeville in the district tournament.