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PAINING & DRINKING

The social art craze helps people creatively unwind with cocktails and canvases

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COVER STORY

PAINTING THE TOWN RED

(and blue and green ...)

At popular social painting events, dabblers release their inner Picassos with the help of a drink or two

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI
NEWS ARTS CRITIC

The first rule of Paint Nite is not to be intimidated by Paint Nite. The second rule of Paint Nite is not to dip your paintbrush into your Pinot Grigio. And that's about it for rules. The hugely popular group painting and drinking franchise, which launched in Buffalo last April and runs almost every night in bars and restaurants throughout Erie and Niagara counties, is about as casual an art class as you can imagine.

Paint Nite, founded in Boston in 2012, is the youngest and most buzz-worthy of a handful of organizations in Western New York that match up art teachers with adults eager for a fun night out and way to reactivate creative impulses that have lain dormant since kindergarten.

The social painting craze, which has long been a mainstay in many southern states and has more recently spread to other parts of the country, has been flourishing here for the past two years. And judging by how quickly sessions at the region's other group painting organizations sell out, Buffalo's obsession with social painting doesn't seem likely to let up any time soon.

Eager for a taste of the trend, I ventured out with my boyfriend on a frigid January night to J.P. Bullfeathers, a cozy bar and restaurant on Elmwood Avenue, for the first Paint Nite of the new year.

In a banquet space off Bullfeathers' crowded barroom, 40 pristine white canvases on clear plastic easels and Styrofoam plates with dabs of acrylic paint were arrayed across long

tables. At the front of the room was the template for our collective task: "Blue Moon," a moody painting of a lonely tree dropping white and blue leaves into a murky pond against an overcast and moonlit sky.

The difficulty level was listed as "easy." We would see about that.

At the door, instructor Jennifer Russo handed out lime green aprons, checked visitors in on her iPhone and



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— Jennifer Russo, instructor



sent them to their workstations. A tinny mix of Top 40 hits played on the sound system. Platters of drinks began to arrive almost immediately, the better to ease jitters about a perceived lack of artistic ability.

The first order of business: Get to know your neighbors and start working on that buzz.

I sat at a table next to Brenda Boyle and her daughter Clare, who had bought her mother a ticket as a Christmas present.

"I told her the greatest gift I wanted from her was for her to give me time," Brenda said. Her last significant brush with art-making, she added, was about

40 years ago as a commercial art student at Bryant and Stratton College. "But I have experience drinking wine." And that kind of experience, as it turns out, is all you need to succeed at Paint Nite.

True to the maxim that those who can't do critique, my own artistic abilities run toward stick figures, dressing up average iPhone photos with Instagram filters and scribbling the odd sketch of a sculpture or painting in a museum that looks approximately nothing like the real thing.

But it turned out I was in good company.

"How many of you haven't painted since kindergarten or ever?" Russo asked. Dozens of hands shot up. "Most of you? Perfect."

"The best part about this is you don't have to know anything about painting to be here tonight. We will walk you through every step of the way."

We began with the swirling sky, touching a dab of black paint to the edge of our blob of white and mixing until we had something that vaguely resembled the tone of a threatening rain cloud. A few brush strokes later, and there they were: 40 overcast skies, each a slightly different shade but all convincingly, reassuringly skylike.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the number of painterly experiments rose in



A recent Paint Nite in J.P. Bullfeathers was another sold-out event. In the top photo, Arts Critic Colin Dabkowski sits near Brenda Boyle and her daughter Clare Boyle. At left, Karen Denz of Hamburg and her sister Chris White of North Boston share a bottle of wine as they paint.

direct proportion to the number of drinks consumed. As the night wore on, my tablemate Clare became more and more creative, adding a craggy root system to her tree and frequently second-guessing Russo's instructions. In a fit of whimsy, after knocking back a few Southern Tier 2XMAS beers, she decided to throw in a cow jumping over the moon, complete with udder.

"My tree looks the best out of all of us, but I've spilled my drink four times," Clare said, appraising our work with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. "So who's really losing here?"

It was not clear who was losing. What was clear enough was that Clare and Brenda, along with the other

friends, families and couples at the event, were having a great time bonding over the experience.

"It's art. You do what you want, mom," Clare said in response to her mother's question about what she was supposed to do next. "That's the answer!"

Clare, impersonating her mother: "How far should the leaves fall?" Brenda, under her breath: "Not far from the tree, apparently."

I stuck with the program up until the addition of the tree, which in my painting looked more like a sad uncle holding two armfuls of strangely colored golf balls than anything you would find in nature.

Apparently to draw more atten-

tion to that misstep, I gave my tree two bright white dots for eyes and a frown. Not exactly Charles Burchfield, sure, but I convinced myself it had a kind of absurdist humor to it.

My boyfriend, who knows his way around a paintbrush much better than I do, opted for a more austere, Japanese-inspired landscape, placing the tree in the center of the canvas and encircling it with a gauzy white frame.

As Russo and my fellow painters constantly reassured me throughout the evening, much to my relief, there is no such thing as a mistake at Paint Nite.

First-time Paint Niteers Rachael Blaszk and Eric Lang of Buffalo, for whom the experience was also a Christmas gift, brought Lang's parents along for the outing. His mother made a sweeping, impressionistic scene that bore little resemblance to the original but was beautiful nonetheless. His father added a little shack next to the tree, giving the scene a charming kind of Ashcan school look.

None of the paintings, it probably goes without saying, are going into the Albright-Knox Art Gallery any time soon.

Russo often entertains skeptical patrons — I was one, I'll admit — who either think the event will be like some kind of hokey group therapy project or a strange, voluntary sweatshop of mass-produced kitsch. But after a few brush strokes and a few more cocktails, it's easy to see that even reluctant participants start to embrace their inherent creativity.

Because visual art typically drops out of our daily lives and conversations somewhere around the fifth grade, this particular benefit of Paint Nite and other social painting events strikes me as well worth the \$40 admission fee.

And while avant-garde art folks and others allergic to anything the rabble might enjoy will inevitably turn up their noses at events like this, it also serves as a refreshing corrective to the art world's haughtiest institutions, too many of which have spent the past three decades intimidating and alienating their potential audience members.

At Paint Nite and other social painting events through the region, any hint of intimidation disappears with the first cocktail.

"It's not really about having the skill to paint. It's mostly about just getting together with friends and family and just connecting over a new experience together," Russo said. "I'll walk you through it every step of the way and you're going to surprise yourself. And they do. Everyone leaves with a smile on their face and they do tell me that they were surprised by what they were capable of."

email: cdabkowski@buffnews.com

More places for social painting

There are several social painting groups throughout Western New York. Most are headquartered at a studio, and most are BYOB. They range in price from about \$25 to \$55. Make sure to check Livingsocial and Groupon, as social painting organizations often run deals. A few places to check out:

- Art By You**
www.art-by-you.com
4808 Transit Road, Depew
(510-5949)
- Painting with a Twist**
www.paintingwithatwist.com
6363 Transit Road, Lancaster
(391-1956)
- Paint on Tap**
www.paintontapstudio.com
5762 Main St., Williamsville
(932-7694)
650 Main St., East Aurora
(714-5448)
- Paint Nite Buffalo**
www.paintnite.com
Various locations
- Pinot's Palette**
www.pinotspalette.com
9570 Transit Road,
East Amherst
(218-8446)

