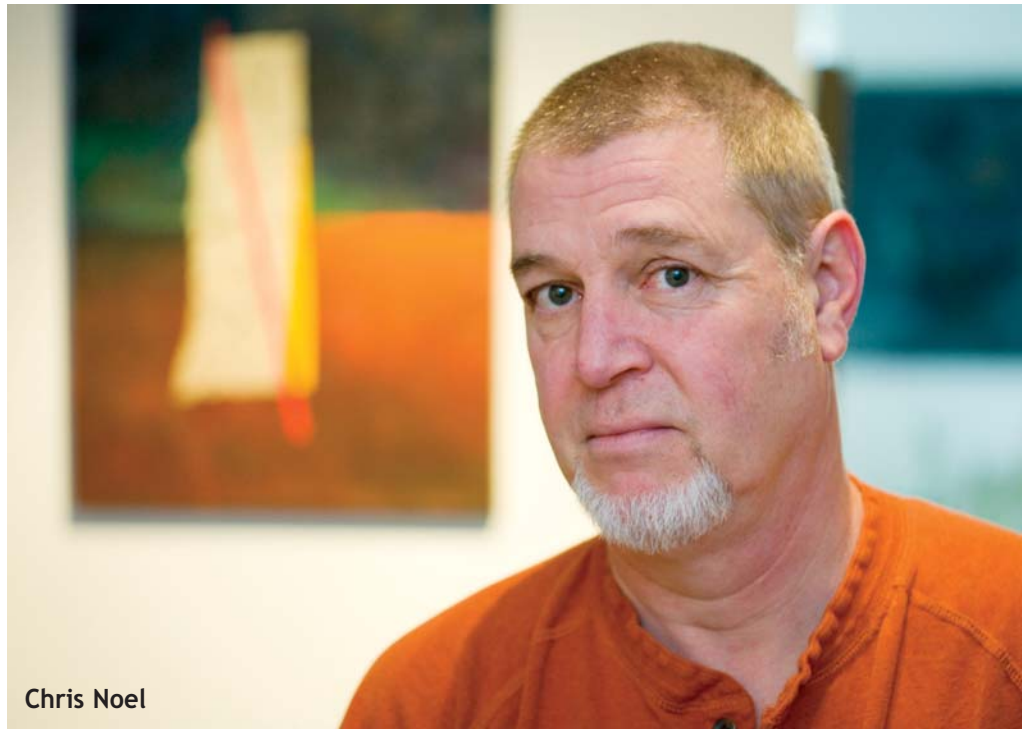# Postconsumer Realism

by Jacqueline M. Duda

Making art from garbage wasn't part of Chris Noel's original plan. But it nevertheless evolved into the Montgomery Village artist's mission. "I feel like it's the right thing to do," he says. A graphic artist by day, Noel started painting in a serious way about five years ago—right about the time he turned 50 years old. Before then, Noel had dabbled in painting when he was in high school, but never felt he was very good at it. At 50, Noel picked up the brush again and decided to do something different. "Painting was something I always enjoying doing," Noel explains, and adds with a laugh, "And I like the fact that I can call my work garbage and feel good about it."

Chris Noel

PHOTO BY PAUL KLINE

InSight: So art, for you, is a reawakened interest?

Noel: My older brother tried it for a while when I was still in high school. He didn't go for it, and he gave me all his paints. That's how I got started. After high school, I went into landscaping for a few years, until I decided that I needed to further my education. So I went to college for graphic design. I wanted to study painting, but college was on my own dime then. I thought that I needed to learn something I could earn a solid living at, and graphic design has been very good to me. My painting is an extension of that (graphic design).

InSight: How so?

Noel: It doesn't require a conscious effort. It's knowing how certain types of arrangements work, how to move color around, and line things up to create a comfortable visual relationship. This is my natural way of doing things. In some ways, painting is an escape from design, where I get to be "sloppy and loose." When I'm really busy with my design work, my painting gets even looser. And when I have more time, my paintings become more meticulous and "designy." There's always an element of design involved, you can't get away from it. Whenever you're dealing with compositional elements, you're designing. I've been doing design for so long that it just comes out.

InSight: Are you trying to be politically correct by using garbage in your paintings?

Noel: It's funny, I was flying back from San Francisco from a press check and I decided, "I'm turning 50; I'm just going to do it"—paint. I bought some canvases and some paint. I painted them all and I didn't like any of them. None of them looked like anything I hadn't seen before. And I was out of canvases. I didn't want to go out and buy more canvas, and I didn't want to repaint over the other paintings. So I started looking around the house. I found old pieces of plywood and stuff that I could bolt onto the boards. Instead of painting a piece of wood on the canvas, I used the actual piece. Once I locked onto this idea—that artwork is something that could just have been found the way it is and made by time, rather than created by a person—I was doing something I hadn't seen before. It happened pretty quickly and from then on I was doing these paintings with stuff attached to them. I thought, "OK, this is what I'm supposed to be doing." It's spontaneous, but a long process. I don't preconceive something or sketch it out first. I start finding things and start working with color. It became "postconsumer realism," artifacts from modern society that would have otherwise ended up forgotten in a landfill. I like the idea of

preserving something and seeing the beauty in something that ordinary people wouldn't take the time to notice. When I had my first show, I made a joke about it: "Now that I've saved the planet, I can move on and do different things." My original intent was just to paint. Now I'm obsessed. Everything I do has to have some element of recycling in it. Even some of my old printed design jobs go into my paintings, like layers and layers of paper pasted onto a board. The paint gives it a trapezoidal effect, like cubism.

InSight: What else have you used in your artwork?

Noel: I did a painting with old floppy disks. I use lots of computer parts and electronics. Remote controls, paper, one of my socks. Anything I can attach to a board and paint. I've done a few paintings where I used old house paint that I had lying around and I just poured it onto the canvas. I even save all my old paint from my palette. When it gets thick, I scrape it off so I can incorporate the scrapings later, as color accents. There was one series that I did, the Cellar Series, where I used paneling I had pulled out of my basement when we remodeled. Even the boards that I paint on, I find these. I've used old weathered wood for a canvas, and left all the cracks in it so you could see that it's an old piece of wood. People are throwing these things away. I feel an extra little bit of joy for that.

InSight: Do you hunt for specific things to make a painting?

Noel: I don't pick up something and say, "I'm going to make a painting out of this." Generally, I start painting first to get the background and the color going. Then I start digging around through a box, or I'll remember something I've had and use that. My painting is well thought out, but spontaneous. I'll remove things: scrape things out of the painting because I couldn't get them to work. It's a process; it's like therapy. I have no idea what I'm going to end up with. In some cases, there are a lot of failures before I touch on something I like. I know the painting is finished when a name pops into my mind; when I can see something that relates to something. The names of some are tongue-in-cheek; they have double meanings or are a little ambiguous. When I can name it, it's done.

Mission Control

Chris Noel's work will be on display at the Blackrock Center for the Arts during January, www.blackrockcenter.org.

Industry