

where are they now?

**Charles S. Nutt Professor of Fine Arts
Emeritus George Chaplin**

George Chaplin, who retired in 1991 to be with his first wife who had fallen ill, spends much of his time now painting or organizing upcoming exhibitions. But he still manages to find time to return to Trinity once a year to teach his favorite course, “Design.” Although it is a 100-level course, Chaplin says he enjoys the unpredictability of what the students do. But this self-professed hard grader makes no compromises with his tough grading system. “I can, and do, give D’s and F’s,” he says emphatically. “It’s an intensive course, even at the 100 level, I don’t believe in grade inflation. An ‘A’ really means excellent study, and when a student receives one, s/he should have earned it.”

Much of Chaplin’s inspiration for his work comes from being outdoors with nature. While waiting outside a local shop on a recent trip to Nantucket with his second wife, Patience, a bunch of impatiens caught his eye. “I began to see an illusion of color I hadn’t noticed before around the edges of the flowers.” The impatiens were red but were situated among greens. That became the basis for a whole series of paintings. “I’m constantly feeding off things I see in nature. It’s exciting,” he says.

Growing up in Portland, Maine, Chaplin’s love for color was fostered by his exposure to the ocean. “I could stare at it for hours,” he recalls. “It’s a mesmerizing experience, sort of like looking at fire—it’s always the same but always changing. I want my painting to have this effect. The more you look at it, the more it keeps changing.”

Often at his exhibition openings, Chaplin is asked to talk about his work. “Color does what words can’t do. While I can talk about some aspects, in the end, using one set of abstracts (color) to describe another (words) is impossible, at least on my terms. It’s so much about the sense of vision,” he says, adding, “Color speaks for me; I mean deep down in me.” Chaplin recalls a woman who once approached him at an exhibit and said simply and perhaps interrogatively, “It keeps moving, and the color is changing.” Chaplin, burst out, “Yes! Yes! You get it.”

Although color and painting are what feed the colorist, he still feels he is “stealing time” to paint between errands and the numerous other appointments and obligations of retirement. For Chaplin, however, painting is crucial. “If I don’t paint for a while, I get edgy (so I’ve been told), but even then I’m thinking painting,” he says. “It’s who I am. I’ve always done it, and it’s all I know. I love it and I can’t wait to get to my next piece. It’s always been that way.”

Chaplin says he has many paintings left in him and won’t stop until the end, but, he adds, he wouldn’t have it any other way. “It’s a lousy business,” he says, with a slight smile and deep sigh of satisfaction, “but a great life.”

