

dotours

art

BY GLEN STARKEY



The other mouse

Neither Mighty nor Mickey, this mouse is in a league of his own

On Saturday, Nov. 29, at 5:57 p.m., a shiny black stretch limo pulled up to the curb in front of the Mission Plaza on Higuera Street, delivering San Francisco husband-and-wife team Leonard Filgate and Susan Yost-Filgate, who arrived to attend an opening reception of a showing of paintings, drawings, prints, and products associated with Rip Squeak, a children's book character.

Astonished onlookers no doubt wondered what was more unlikely: that an artist would (or could!) arrive to his opening by limousine, or that paintings of a

mouse caricature and his friends could fetch upward of \$30,000 a painting (for the record, the two original acrylics on display at Just Looking Gallery are priced at \$8,000 and \$12,000, but Filgate's work frequently sells for tens of thousands of dollars).

Clearly, Rip Squeak is no ordinary mouse and the Filgates no ordinary success story. In four short years, under the guidance of SLO Town resident Beda Schmidthues, who runs the Rip Squeak empire from a SLO warehouse, Filgate's paintings have gone from selling for \$3,000 apiece to 10 times that much, giclée prints are available in dozens of galleries across the United States, four books have been published, puzzles and T-shirts licensed, open and limited edition figurines manufactured, and discussions continue about future movies and TV shows.

Last April Rip Squeak was the featured character for the *Los Angeles Times*' eighth annual Festival of Books, adorning the program cover and the event's posters. In 2004, Filgate's paintings will appear in a one-man show at the Delaware Art Museum, which boasts illustrations by Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth. Said Dr. Joyce K. Schiller, associate curator of 19th century art at the museum, "I was so surprised to find a 21st century illustrator whose work was so visually related to the Pyle pirate paintings in our collection! Filgate, a contemporary artist, understands Pyle's illustrative art and is taking it in a new direction."

"There are currently more than 100,000 books in print—70,000 children's books and 35,000 coffee table books," said Schmidthues. "And Leonard's paintings are not necessarily children's art. They're not only about your children but the child in you. They tap into childhood memories."

No doubt about it, Filgate's characters are charmers, with big expressive eyes and cute faces. They have imaginative adventures involving adventure and discovery. And they do appeal to adults. Schmidthues told one story of a collector who, upon discovering Filgate's work, bought one of every print available: "He said he was going to get rid of all the art in his house and put up nothing but Leonard's work. He said he wanted to smile in every room he entered."

Could the Filgates ever have expected such a reaction to their creation?

"Well, we certainly hoped," said Filgate during an interview at this show's opening last weekend.

"It was something we had in mind when we got into it," added Yost-Filgate, who worked in the past with the company that managed Peanuts characters. "I had experienced the business firsthand. The combination of [Leonard's] artistry, putting his art togeth-



er with stories that appealed to all ages, we hoped it would touch people."

What certainly does touch people are the sweet elements of the stories, which are frequently about sharing and bravery and tolerance.

"I don't like to be preachy," explained Yost-Filgate, "but raising a child in San Francisco makes you sensitive [about] sending the right message. Everyone wants to create wonderful, tolerant children. These stories are another tool."

"In my way, I want to do visually what Susan does in written form: to give children something positive to focus on," said Filgate.

Apparently children aren't the only ones focusing on Filgate's work. He's made 72 Rip Squeak paints, of which



nearly 60 have sold. At thousands of dollars apiece, children are not the buyers. Between the sales and his upcoming museum show, it's clear people have noticed the paintings' artistic merit. Filgate uses old masters techniques, layering glazes of paint to create subtle highlights and depths. His techniques are extremely time consuming and yield no more than 20 paintings a year.

"Each one is like moving into a new house," explained Filgate. "You slowly get things arranged, but there's always something that's not quite right."

The perfectionist inside frequently makes it difficult for Filgate to finish a painting once and for all, but the final product never fails to appeal to the public.

What surprised all involved—both the Filgates and Schmidthues—is what a lucrative market children's book illustrations offer. There's now a third children's book in the works called "Rip Squeak and Friends Go Off on Adventure," Adventure being the pirate ship they discovered in the last story, "The Treasure."

"You haven't seen anything yet," exclaimed Filgate, a look of mischief in his eyes. "The new story and paintings are so exciting and I'm having so much fun making them, I can't wait to wake up in the morning." Δ

Glen Starkey's inner child escapes daily.

The mouse that roared

Paintings, drawings, prints, and products from "The Roaring Adventures of Rip Squeak" are currently on display at Just Looking Gallery (746 Higuera, SLO, 541-6663). Leonard Filgate provides artwork and his wife, Susan Yost-Filgate, writes stories for the children's book series, which so far has yielded two coffee table books and two children's books: "Rip Squeak and His Friends" and "The Treasure." Δ

