

# Master of Illusion

A sometime California art teacher turns Bay Islands innkeeper and cultural institution.

**T**HAT'S RIGHT — I JUST USED the G-word," says artist Neil Keller, arching an eyebrow while awaiting my reaction. As I take in his work, I know he's talking about Antoni Gaudi, the architect best known for La Sagrada Familia, in Barcelona, Spain, the church topped with as much ornamentation as a birthday cake iced by an exuberant child. Not that Gaudi's or Keller's efforts seem childish. Rather, both creators evolved past the restraints often associated with adulthood, freeing them to produce anything within their junglelike imaginations.

In Keller's case, the result is Jade Seahorse restaurant and the Cabins at Nightland, a hideaway popular with backpackers and other travelers seeking novel experiences on Utila, the third-largest of Honduras' Bay Islands. Here Keller has turned every inch of wall, walkway and support beam into an unending mosaic of baubles and bottles, broken tiles, plates, pottery, antique aquarium ornaments and telephone-pole insulators, as well as glass corn on the cobs and bananas. Also part of his vision: the Treetanic Bar, whose lofty perch and funky vibe attract techno-loving locals and in-the-know visitors.

Like Gaudi, Keller shuns the linear and the expected. It's chaos — not pattern — that dominates. Glass birds, statuettes of Maya gods, anchors and shells appear next to ceramic frogs frozen in compromising positions.

Clearly Keller has a sense of humor, and he takes pride in his work. When I compliment him on it, he beams. Yet earlier in the day, when a dainty Texan among the parade of visitors cooingly



asked him if he was the artist, he said that he was merely the caretaker.

It seems Keller sees conversation as simply another creative outlet. I'd heard he was from Spain or Copan. That he was an art dealer in New York. That he was a mute. Of course none of it was true. So when Keller brings up Gaudi, I sense he's baiting me to traffic in the same tired comparisons as those travelers before me. Instead, I opt for evasiveness.

"I suppose there is a Gaudi quality to your work," I say. "But I certainly wouldn't say it is too much."

"The word gaudy comes from Gaudi," Keller says. He speaks slowly and deliberately, like Steve Martin, pausing to let his comment take effect. Briefly I wonder if Keller is right about the word's derivation and make a mental note to Google it later.

We move on to a five-armed ovoid-shaped sculpture. Glass discs hang from

Man on a mission: Artist Neil Keller's muses include shapely sea horses and other lyrical forms of marine life.



its hollow center, chiming against one another with each passing breeze.

I ask if it represents anything.

"Oh, yeah," he says without elaborating. "What's your guess?"

"I don't know if —"

"That's good. We'll stay with that. It's wide-open." He flashes a conspiratorial smile. "You're thinking just what I was: a sea form." He has credited me prematurely, but I take the opportunity to press him about his inspirations.

Growing up in California, he tells me, he learned to free-dive off Catalina Island and became fascinated with the otherworldly forms of underwater creatures,

such as crinoids and sea cucumbers. "If I hadn't become an artist, I would have been a cellular biologist," he muses, citing math as the leading deterrent.

Keller studied art at California State University, Los Angeles, and went on to teach middle- and high-school drawing. Summers were reserved for travel. He roamed through Mexico and Central America, eventually landing in Copan, an inland city of Honduras near the Guatemala border. There he heard about the reefs of a then-undiscovered outpost called Utila.

One flight later, he was smitten with the island and its laid-back lifestyle, from then on stealing off to it at every opportunity: holidays, vacations, summer breaks. Along the way he married and, with his wife, Julia, made a leap he never imagined: The couple bought land on Utila, built a house and, operating out of it as Fruit Shake Village, began serving smoothies and other health-conscious fare.

In 1998 they expanded their kitchen, renamed their venture Jade Seahorse and

added the Treetanic Bar. The Keller family also grew; by 2000 it included daughters Tempy and Juneil. Neil was still commuting across countries, clocking in at his art-teacher gig in California, then jetting back home. While the steady paycheck kept them afloat, Julia let it be known that she'd rather have a steady partner. Thus, Keller quit his job to design Nightland, their six-cabin resort. Each cabin has its own theme: Shangrila, Fantasea, Dali Llama, Cama Sutra, Cuarto Q'Arto, Mono Lisa. Keller's playfulness extends to every detail.

For instance, Shangrila's decor includes a tiny purple sofa with a doll reclining on top. Flip open this miniature, and you'll find a plastic glow-in-the-dark skeleton. Such quirky touches pervade the property, where very little impedes Keller's grand vision.

"Here I don't have to wait six months to have an inspector approve something.

Building codes, permits and inspections just don't exist," he notes. "For an artist-architect, Utila is paradise."

Keller strides purposefully off in the direction of an on-site cave of his creation. Its ceiling sparkles with a myriad of glass beads, each placed with consideration to the others surrounding it. I see spirals and circles. I see a man compelled to create. I ask Keller why he labors on this intricate masterwork.

"I would do this any place I had the opportunity, because it takes up the day," he says.

I think back to his glass kilns and the sketchbooks and piles of half-finished crossword-puzzle books blanketing his workshop tables. It appears that Keller's mind demands constant stimulation. Before I can press him further, the artist as teacher offers a moment of candor.

"I want to show people what they could do," he adds, "that their illusions can be made actual." — BROOKE MORTON

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