

Kurt Kauper in his
Brooklyn studio

New York Flash

Creative Types

If there's a secret to achieving success at an early age, then these six New Yorkers have found it.

PHOTOS BY ROBERT WRIGHT

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST Kurt Kauper

Two of Kurt Kauper's "Diva" paintings hang on the walls of his Brooklyn studio and stare imperiously at anyone who dares to make eye contact with them. *Diva Fiction #11*, a black woman with close-cropped hair, wears a Louis Féraud gown with an abstract cutout plunging toward her décolleté, while *Diva Fiction #14*, a brunette, poses in a stiff Christian Dior suit. The paintings convey a formality and sense of discipline that seem at odds with the other half of the loft—the living space the artist shares with his wife, 18-month-old son, three rabbits and a Dalmatian.

"Now my son, Asher, can crawl over and demand to come into the studio, so I'm thinking about finding a separate work space," says the 34-year-old artist. But you get the feeling that Kauper is so focused, he could concentrate just about anywhere.

Kauper has been painting the stern, androgynous divas since 1995. "He's a really remarkable painter," says Jane Farver, director of the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "I love the way he's been able to reinsert himself into the history of American painting along the lines of Sargent. I like that these are fictional characters that almost approach royalty."

With the hard, direct gaze born of self-confidence, the larger-than-life imaginary opera singers demand to be noticed. The ambiguity of their gender, however, was not a conscious decision, Kauper says. "They were never intended to be drag queens," he explains, dispelling a common misconception. "Because they're fictional, I tend to invent masculine features. They assume a certain mien that has been coded as masculine. They're in control, and that's part of the androgyny."

The artist is interested in that slippery and complex phenomenon known as "identity" and is keen to explore anything that confuses the issue. The divas, however, don't seem to be as concerned with their identities. They are interested in conveying their success and achievement, and their self-possessed countenance and haughty body language make their perceived musical (continued on page 376)



Kauper's Diva Fiction #9

Creative Types



Diva Fiction #8

(continued from page 371) powers all the more plausible.

While the faces of the divas are fictional, their gowns are quite real. The artist makes facsimiles of haute couture creations he sees in magazines rather than borrowing the gowns from designers. "I like the idea of constructing something out of nothing," he says.

The oils-on-panel series has been the subject of two shows at the ACME Gallery in Los Angeles and Deitch Projects in Manhattan. *Diva Fiction* #7, #8 and #9 were included in this year's Whitney Biennial. Equally encouraging for a young artist is the fact that all the paintings have been sold.

Still, Kauper is ready to move on. The divas are based on traditional opera stars in the mold of Maria Callas and Leontyne Price. But today, the word "diva" has been subverted to refer to pop stars such as Mariah Carey and demanding entrepreneurs like Martha Stewart. "I don't want my paintings to become part of that cultural concept," says the artist, whose next project will involve paintings of men and possibly self-portraits.

Kauper, who grew up in the suburbs of Boston, picked up a paintbrush when he was six and started studying seriously when he was 16. After college, he moved to New York, where he painted by day and worked as a security guard at the Plaza Hotel at night. After a year and a half, Kauper decided to escape the grind by attending graduate school at UCLA.

It was a stimulating environment. Kauper's professors included Lari Pittman, Charles Ray and Paul McCarthy. Classmates such as Amy Adler, Martin Kersels, Ginny Bishton and Kevin Appell have all established successful careers. "I got there at a really great time," he says. "It's now turned into an art-career mill. Scores of curators and critics go to all the studios and create what seems to me a lot of unhealthy competition."

Of course, Kauper is no stranger to competition. "The Biennial," he says, "is something every artist lusts after. But I don't really think it makes careers. Success is going to come from the work. Once you've been in the Biennial, it's clear that it doesn't stop there."

FAMILY TIES Paige and Palmer West

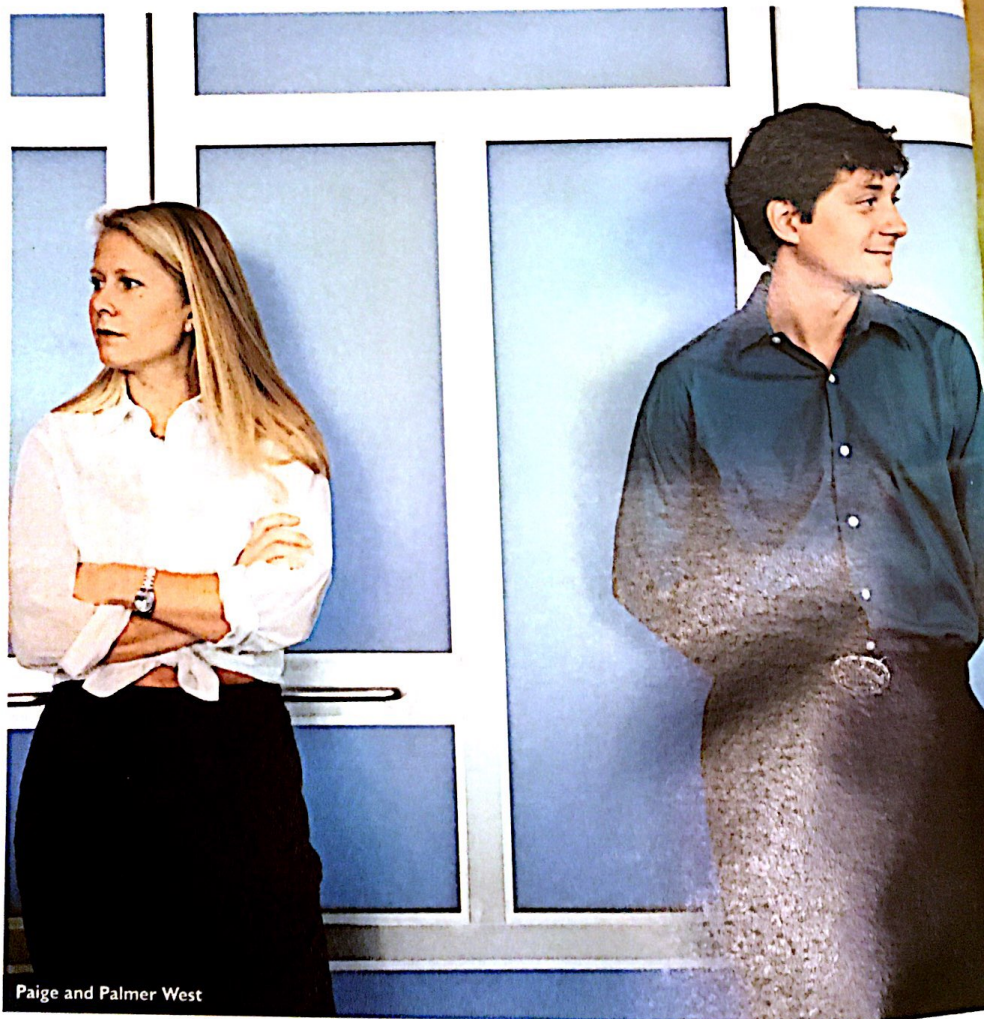
When Paige West, 32, and her brother, Palmer, 27, were growing up in Paoli, a small town outside Philadelphia, they had a pretty normal relationship for siblings born five years apart, which is to say they didn't have much of a relationship at all. "We really weren't close," says Palmer.

Today they work together in a massive art-filled office in the hip Starrett-Lehigh building on West 26th Street, gush over one another's work and share 29 full-time employees. "I remember calling her when I was still in college and thinking, 'She's not so bad, she's pretty cool,'" says Palmer, who hooked up with his sister after graduating from the University of Montana with an acting degree.

At the time, Paige was curating a corporate art collection in New York, but she decided she wanted to make documentaries about emerging artists. It didn't take long for brother and sister to figure out that their overlapping interests would serve them well as business partners.

"I needed a production entity, and Palmer wanted to make films, so we started Sibling Entertainment," says Paige. Later they created two separate companies under the Sibling umbrella: Paige's multimedia firm, Mixed Greens, and Palmer's production company, Thousand Words.

Since 1998, Palmer has produced three films, all of them offbeat. *Saturn* is the story of a



Paige and Palmer West

Paige makes documentaries about emerging artists. Palmer produces edgy films.

21-year-old boy who becomes the sole caretaker of his dying father. *Requiem for a Dream* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and will be released by Artisan Entertainment in October; the psychological thriller was directed by Darren Aronofsky (see profile, page 314).

Finally there's *Waking Life*, an animated feature from Richard Linklater, who directed *Dazed and Confused*. "It embodies all of Rick's sense of humor and philosophical inquiry," Palmer says. "It makes you laugh and think at the same time."

Paige, who studied art in college, pushes the boundaries between the commercial and the non-commercial. She says that Mixed Greens' profitable businesses, including a Web site that sells the work of emerging artists, will support more esoteric projects such as *Worst Possible Illusion*, a documentary about the life and work of photographer Vik Muñoz, who will have a one-man show at the Whitney Museum of American Art next year.

While the Wests are vague about their financing, citing "a source of private equity with no strings attached," they are in the enviable position of being able to pursue pet projects without the constraints of a board of directors, anxious shareholders or investors itchy for returns.

"*Requiem for a Dream*, *Saturn* and *Waking Life* show a sense of fearlessness and each one has its absolute merit," says Palmer. "I sleep very easily knowing I made those films."

THE BOOKMAKER Kristin Kiser

In the space of a recent 36 hours, Kristin Kiser, an executive editor at Crown, traveled to Chicago for a Kiss concert at the behest of Gene Simmons, whose autobiography she is publishing, then flew to Washington, D.C., for a book party at the home of Alan Greenspan and Andrea Mitchell in honor of Erik Tarloff, one of her authors. The trip, which she calls "the most surreal experience of my life," combined a raunchy rock act with highbrow inside-the-Beltway conversation and represents the diversity of Kiser's literary tastes.

Like her former boss, Judith Regan, Kiser has a penchant for self-help topics and popular culture; she's edited books by Britney Spears, Derek Jeter and Suzanne Somers. But she is also passionate about fiction and narrative nonfiction, like *The Last River: The Tragic Race for Shangri-La*, an upcoming book about a kayaking expedition in Tibet that Kiser compares to *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's account of a fateful trip to Mount Everest.

At 31, Kiser is the youngest of four executive editors at Crown by a good 10 to 15 years. Blond, with a corn-fed complexion, she looks more like an editorial assistant than a publishing powerhouse. But looks are deceiving. "She could spot a really good story for a book a mile away," says Lane Zachary, a literary agent at the Zachary Shuster Agency in Boston. "She has gotten quite far for her age. To be an executive editor this young is rare. Many people stay senior editors for their entire lives."

Kiser's book list is eclectic. "I like things that are more commercial than literary," she says. "I'm not going to be editing the next James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, but I like things that are a little edgy. I would love to work with Jon Krakauer or Jane Smiley, but they're pie in the sky."

"*The Last River* is the most gratifying thing I've worked on," adds Kiser, who read Todd Balf's article in *Men's Journal* and immediately thought it would make a great book. "It's our 'make' book for fall that's not a celebrity title."

Celebrity subjects are, in fact, a tricky business. The fickle public's adoration can turn on a moment's notice, transforming yesterday's superstar into tomorrow's has-been faster than you can say "Jewel." "There's success versus heat," Kiser explains. "Britney Spears is hot. With Gene Simmons, there's depth to his story that's counterintuitive to his image. His mother is a concentration-camp survivor who moved to Israel, where Gene was born. He went to yeshiva in Brooklyn as a child. That's fascinating when you put it up against the man with the mask and the long tongue."

Not that Kiser ever planned on polishing the musings of pop stars. As an undergraduate, she wanted to be a journalist, but enrolled in New York University's master's-degree program in literature instead. "I loved the reading but hated the ivory-tower aspect," she says. "Reading Shakespeare is wonderful, but I felt that no one would see my papers except my professors."



"I'm not going to be editing the next James Joyce or Virginia Woolf," says Kiser, "but I like things that are a little edgy."

Creative Types

Her first job was in children's publishing, where discussions centered on fuzzy duckies and whether a pig is cuter than a bunny. She moved to adult publishing at Dell, where she worked for Leslie Schnur, the powerful editorial director, then joined Regan's boot camp before moving to Crown.

Kiser claims there's no great secret to her success. "I work really hard," she says. "It's not anything really fancy. I don't even feel like I'm successful yet. Until you have a book like *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, there's always something to strive for."

LORD OF THE NOVEL **Tristan Egolf**

Tristan Egolf's first novel, *Lord of the Barnyard: Killing the Fatted Calf and Arming the Aware in the Cornbelt*, is an over-the-top account of the miserable life of John Kaltenbrunner. A die-hard loner, John lives in the fictional eastern Kentucky town of Baker, a haven for inbred river rats, barroom brawls and corrupt church officials.

"I spent part of my childhood in the Midwest," says the 28-year-old Egolf, sitting in an East Village bar and wearing a faded work shirt and several days' stubble. "It was enough to have a solid lock on the area from the inside, but with an outsider's distance."

By the age of nine, John realizes he has no use for school, with its bullies and insensitive teachers, and devotes his energies to upgrading the farm he and his mother inherited from his father. If John is a composite "of a whole bunch of

different elements and a way of tying it all together—the alienation of a small town, the odd jobs and the educational system," as the author says, there are shades of John in Egolf and shades of Egolf in John. The author raised chickens in his youth and had a sheep named Isabel that was every bit as foul and nasty as the one in the book. He also had an unfortunate number of menial jobs and a strong disdain for public education.

"I've never experienced anything more counterproductive to an individual's development than public school," says Egolf, who wasn't too impressed with college, either. The writer, who went to Temple University in Philadelphia for one year, concludes: "It was just a waste of everybody's time and money. I really wanted to be reading. I read *The Brothers Karamazov* and tons of Dostoyevsky, everything I could get my hands on."

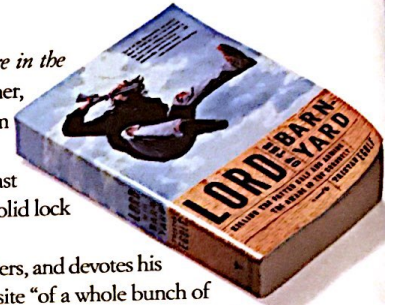
To support himself during his literary enlightenment, Egolf worked the 4 p.m.-to-midnight shift at a Wawa convenience store in Philadelphia. When he got home, he'd read until 4 a.m., sitting in the bathtub—fully clothed—to hide from his roommate, who was partying and swinging from the chandeliers.

Egolf finished *Barnyard* in Paris in 1996. Several years earlier, while living there and busking on the streets, he met the daughter of Patrick Modiano, the famous French novelist, and remained friendly with the family. After the book was rejected by 76 U.S. publishers, Egolf gave a copy to Modiano, who showed it to someone at his publishing house. "They finally published it," Egolf recalls. "They said, 'Who is this kid?' Modiano said, 'Someone playing guitar on the bridge, who my daughter met.'"

The book came out in the U.K. in June 1998 and was released in paperback by Grove Press in March. *Barnyard* has been compared to John Kennedy O'Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces*, as well as the work of Thomas Pynchon and Sinclair Lewis.

"*Barnyard* took a lot out of me," says Egolf. "I went into a long postpartum depression after that. I lost most of my friends, my girlfriend; I lost my mind, part of my health, and I lost my way. But I've written three books since then." He discarded the first. The second may have some salvageable parts, but the third and most promising is almost finished and will be published by Grove.

Called *Thousands Flee*, it's a love story that centers on killing rats in the sewers of Philadelphia in the middle of winter. Okay, it's



"'Barnyard' took a lot out of me," says Egolf. "I went into a postpartum depression."



Mina Newman

Newman developed her sophisticated tastes as a child. On Sundays, her mother prepared ceviche, escabeche, tripe and sweet-and-sour dishes.



Newman's steak tartare

badly," she says. "My station was right next to He was always on top of me."

Newman swoons over Troigros' tarot-root ravioli with truffle cream sauce, his scrambled eggs with caviar and his flash-seared salmon with sorrel sauce, a signature dish of the chef's father, Pierre. "I learned technique and respect for food at CT," she says.

When CT closed, Newman became sous chef at Layla, Drew Nieporent's Middle Eastern-influenced restaurant. But two years into that gig, she hung up her apron and embarked on an eight-month eating-and-cooking tour that took in Turkey, Morocco, Spain, France, Italy and Greece. She had been living in Greece for four months when Nieporent lured her back with the offer of the chef's toque at Layla.

"She's a very talented young lady," says Nieporent. "Middle Eastern cuisine is one of the most interesting cuisines. To really do it authentically, you have to immerse yourself in it and do some travel, which she did. This is a highly competitive field, and there are so many talented people that you have to be special to emerge. I think Mina has the talent to compete at a very high level."

Newman left Layla in November 1999 to open a Greek restaurant called Avra. But the owners replaced her as chef, because she

not your typical love story. "With the new book, I set out to try and develop different aspects of the craft," Egolf says. "There's dialog and conversation, and there are a couple of characters who aren't wretched and insane. There's a woman who is the voice of reason against a nonsensical backdrop."

"The first book came from a spewing out and is a little bit undisciplined," says Morgan Entrekin, president and publisher of Grove/Atlantic. "Tristan has a lot of natural talent. I'm much more interested in a writer like Tristan, who has a vision and natural exuberance, than someone who was well trained at a creative-writing school and writes well-crafted sentences. Tristan lives life rather than sitting around analyzing it."

The author knows his second novel will be closely scrutinized. "I certainly expect the criticism to be harder this time," he says. "I'm prepared for that. I won't release it until I'm at peace with it, and once I'm at peace with it, that's all that matters."

RISING CHEF Mina Newman

It might seem ironic that Mina Newman, a chef steeped in the Peruvian traditions of her mother and the Mediterranean cuisine of Turkey, Morocco and Greece, is now running the kitchen of an American steak house. But to her credit, Newman has brought her repertoire of exotic spices and marinades to Dylan Prime, a new restaurant on Laight Street in TriBeCa, rather than let the conventional notion of a steak house shape her menu.

Newman first appeared on the foodie radar screen as the chef de cuisine at Layla, also in TriBeCa, where she served b'steeya, a Moroccan pie made with phyllo pastry and filled with cinnamon-spiced carrots, bone marrow and dates. She wrapped seasoned shrimp and salmon in fresh grape leaves before grilling and made a squab tagine with dates, cloves, saffron, turmeric, red wine and squab stock. Her braised octopus terrine with wild fennel greens and pomegranate black-pepper vinaigrette won the gold medal in a salad competition.

Newman developed her sophisticated tastes as a child. On Sundays, her mother prepared ceviche, escabeche, tripe and lots of sweet-and-sour vinegared dishes. Cooking duty later shifted to her older sister, and when she was old enough, Newman herself took the kitchen reins. "I found my passion early," she says. "Because my parents loved good food, they developed our palates when we were young."

Her entry into the restaurant world was less than glamorous—flipping burgers at the American Museum of Natural History when she was 15. Soon she was hanging out with the chefs in the museum's fine-dining room, which closed several years ago. When Fifty Seven Fifty Seven opened at the Four Seasons Hotel, Newman got a job as *garde manger*—the bottom of the ladder—and eventually worked her way up to head line cook, all while completing New York City Technical College's hospitality-management program.

Since she couldn't afford to go to France at the time, she got her education in French cooking at CT, the former restaurant of celebrated chef Claude Troigros. In the typical style of a great chef, Troigros bullied his employees, but Newman was grateful for the instruction. "I wanted someone to yell at me and treat me

Creative Types

wanted to incorporate Turkish elements into the menu, and they envisioned the restaurant as strictly Greek.

At Dylan Prime, Newman calls the culinary shots. She serves two sizes of steak with various sauces and garnishes. The preserved lemon in her hollandaise sauce and her peas with mint and crème fraîche are Moroccan-inspired. And in place of the standard steak house vegetable—creamed spinach—Newman serves braised spinach, swiss chard and dandelion greens.

William Grimes, the notorious *New York Times* food critic, has already eaten at Dylan Prime once, which means that the restaurant and Newman are officially on the map. While he hadn't been back at press time, his visit unsettled the normally unflappable chef. "I was very nervous when I found out he was here," she says. "You feel like you forget how to do everything."

BROADWAY BABY Arielle Tepper

In high school, Arielle Tepper wanted to be an actress, but her drama teacher at the Upper East Side's Dalton School told her she looked too young to be cast in *Death of a Salesman*, the season's play. So Tepper consoled herself by working backstage and designing lighting. It was an epiphany. "I loved it and realized that you can be in theater and not be an actor," she says.

During her junior year of college, Tepper spent a semester in London, where she devoured the theater whole, seeing as many as six shows a week. "When I saw *Les Miserables*, I was so amazed with the scale," she says. "The next day, I went to the Press Association and got all the articles on Cameron Mackintosh. I decided that was who I wanted to be."

At 27, she's well on her way. Tepper has produced two shows on Broadway: John Leguizamo's *Freak* and James Joyce's *The Dead*, which recently won a Tony award for best book of a musical.

She still looks so young that she's often mistaken for a student. But David Bar Katz, a writer and director who developed *Freak*, says, "Ari understands the business side but has an intuitive understanding of the creative side. It's relatively unusual to be good at both."

Tepper paid her dues by interning with everyone from Kevin McCollum and Jeffrey Seller, the producers of *Rent*, to Alan Wasser, the general manager of Mackintosh's American theater empire. By the time she graduated from Syracuse University, she had worked for every major producer on Broadway. The only thing left was to produce her own show.

She found her subject matter in 1997 at a reading for a small musical called *Vices* and rented a 150-seat theater in Chicago. Tepper not only handled the casting and oversaw the budgets, she also designed the show's poster and negotiated with set designers and contractors.

While she admits that her first brush with Broadway was somewhat intimidating, Tepper has never been one to agonize over anything for too long. "*Freak* was a great show," she recalls. "We had the theater for five weeks and sold out the entire run in three days. Gregory [Mosher, her co-producer,] said, 'We have to go to Broadway.' I said, 'I'm 25 years old. I'm not going to Broadway.'"

But sitting in the lobby of the theater one night, she was struck by the laughter and applause coming from inside. She knew she would lose the theater in a week. If she didn't go to Broadway, the play would close. "It was my responsibility," she says. "I had no right to say I was scared. The audience told me they were having a great time."

After *Freak*, Tepper produced two successful shows, Sandra Bernhard's *I'm Still Here...Damn It* and De La Guarda. But *Trainspotting*, a play about a gritty group of drugged-out youths, didn't fare as well with the critics.

These days, Tepper is branching out. She recently bought 50 percent of a recording studio, called Bam Bam, where she hopes to develop music for upcoming projects. She optioned *Naked by the Window*, a book by Robert Katz, for a film. The story of two artists struck a chord with the producer, whose mother was a painter. And *30 Days*, her first film, is being released this month.

Still, Tepper had momentary jitters when debating whether to move *The Dead*, Richard Nelson's hip musicalization of the James Joyce story, from Off Broadway to Broadway. Once again, she let the audience's reaction to the show be her guide.

The Dead is typical of the offbeat fare that appeals to Tepper. "What I like to do are things that are different," she says. "This was the un-musical. There are other people who can do big Broadway musicals better. This is my little world." —SHARON EDELSON

After seeing "Les Miserables," Tepper decided she wanted to be Cameron Mackintosh.



Arielle Tepper in her memorabilia-filled office