



Brent Ballard and Bob Newell with painting by Jennifer Gardiner and sculpture by Kirk Newman

## The House Whisperers: Bob Newell and Brent Ballard

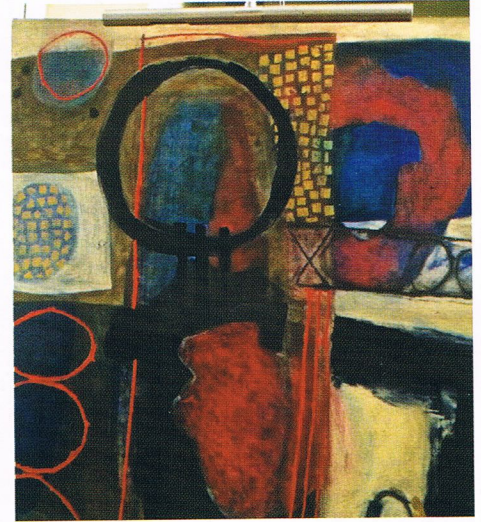
Written and Photography By: Susan Kehoe, PhD

The neighbors who recently moved into Bloomfield Hills have a unique ability to transform the interior of an outdated house or condo into a contemporary home, complete with all the amenities. Besides the design, they do most of the heavy lifting themselves, from plumbing and electrical, to tiling and flooring. Bob Newell and Brent Ballard have renovated about 10 homes in their 30 years together – you might even call them the “House Whisperers.”

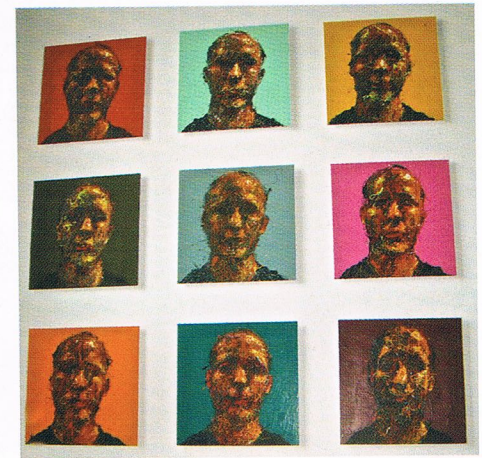
Bob is a mechanical engineer and the owner of Hydrodynamics/Y.C. Smith Company, a provider of services and products for water and waste management plants. Born in Massachusetts, he

came to Michigan to work with Dow Chemical in Midland, and then moved on to Y.C. Smith as a manufacturer’s rep before settling in this area around 1982. He remarked, “It’s interesting the way life leads you to a location you never anticipated when you started out, but I’m very happy here.”

Brent’s professional history is in Compliance and Regulation Development as an Information Technology Project Manager. He was educated as a teacher, but graduated at a time when teaching jobs were sparse and waiting tables did not seem like a stimulating long-term career choice. He grew up in nearby suburbs and has lived in this part of Michigan most of his life.



“This Way and That” by Jennifer Gardiner



“Self Portrait” series by Craig Paul Nowak

Bob and Brent have no fear of moving into a house that would make the hosts of HGTV run for cover. With their skill, they can easily tackle the work and convert it into exactly what they envision. Regarding their new condo in Bloomfield Hills, Bob said, “This is the first place we haven’t had to knock down any walls.” Besides the nitty-gritty of plumbing and roofing, working with wood and cutting moldings is probably his favorite activity. He refitted the closets with drawers and shelves that look like they’re out of a high-end closet furnishings catalog. He even equipped the foyer guest closet with different levels for hanging coats and jackets instead of a single-expanse rod.

Brent does the dry wall, painting, staining, and tiling in addition to the finish work. He said, “I draw the line at hang-



Renovation of Living and Dining Room



"Pointing Back" by Kirk Newman

ing wallpaper. There are no words for how exasperating that is. And scraping layer upon layer from the walls of an old house...I could tell you stories. It just is not worth the time."

The final touch of their makeovers is the hanging and placement of a unique art collection, gathered lovingly over the years. Brent became interested in art by talking with a former colleague, Vince Carducci, who is an artist and professor at the Center for Creative Studies (CCS).

In viewing their collection, my eye was tripped by a piece that is similar to one I've seen gracing the outside of The Stand Restaurant. It's a bronze sculpture of a man running with a briefcase called "Pointing Back." It is from the same series as the large bronze entitled "LOL" that was placed outside the Greenleaf Building in Birmingham, in 2013. Kirk Newman, former Director of the Kalamazoo Institute of Art, created both sculptures.

A series of nine self-portraits by Craig Paul Nowak hang solemnly on their den walls. I recognized the artist's name from his entry "Christina's World" in the Grand Rapids Art Prize competition last year. He graduated from CCS in 2006, the same year that Bob and Brent acquired this series. They also have some paintings by Jennifer Gardiner who has taught printmaking and

drawing at Hope College for 15 years. My favorite is "From One Place to Another" which hangs in the living room.

Besides collecting works of art, Brent also enjoys cooking. He says, "There's something about the calming effect of slicing and dicing, and the adventure of adding whatever is found in the kitchen." He learned by watching a friend and thought it must be the height of satisfaction to prepare food and get it right, then watch people relish every bite. "I want to make something that you can't get in a restaurant, or at least make it better than a restaurant does." The recipe Brent perfected for his "New England beach dinner" is a simmering broth of lobster, clams, star mussels, corn, potatoes, and some secret ingredients all made especially good on the deck of their lake house in Saugatuck. Even his New England clambake pot is something to behold. Bob says he'd rather clean up afterward, which is the perfect complement to a foodie.

Bob and Brent are pleased with their move into the City of Bloomfield Hills and it will probably be the last one for a while, at least until retirement beckons them to Florida where relatives and another chapter awaits.

Get to know your neighbors better by having your family featured in the next available issue! Email us at [awilkinson182@gmail.com](mailto:awilkinson182@gmail.com).


**SKBK**

**Sotheby's**  
INTERNATIONAL REALTY

Birmingham, Michigan | 248.644.7000 | [skbk.com](http://skbk.com)

## Ranni Keating

- Top Producer for over 25 years
- Rated top 1% of Realtors nationally
- "Gatekeeper of Bloomfield Hills" as recognized by Town & Country magazine
- Recently featured in AP article in Wall Street Journal & USA Today
- Interviewed by CNBC on her knowledge of the area's real estate market



248.330.9750  
[rkeating@skbk.com](mailto:rkeating@skbk.com)  
[ronnikeating.com](http://ronnikeating.com)

