

The Case of the Disappearing Courtroom Artist

Photography by Carrie Pickett

A canvas crowded with charcoal sketches of lawyers, judges, witnesses, defendants, and juries peoples the world of the courtroom artist. In this world, likeness, expression, mood, and action help convey to audiences the scene in the courtroom. The artist opens a window so we can all see.

Carole Kabrin, is such an artist. Through her eyes, we've witnessed historic trials and hearings, including the sentencing of convicted Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. We've also watched the U.S. Supreme Court hearing of George W. Bush versus Al Gore, the Mike Tyson rape trial, the Manuel Noriega drug trial, the White-water trial, and more recently the hearing of terrorism suspect Zaccarias Moussaoui, who faces six conspiracy charges in connection with the September 11 attacks last year.

"Years ago, before they let cameras in the courtroom, we worked a lot. Each local station had their own artist... we did all the arraignments and all the trials and I did practically everything that happened. I sold [to] most of the attorneys back then all of my drawings. I'm on everybody's wall, because that is how I survived—selling drawings and working for the TV station," Kabrin said.

Born and raised in Detroit, Carole Kabrin is a senior courtroom artist for the ABC network news. Her main assignment is to draw pictures of United States Supreme Court trials exclusively for ABC. In a world crowded with cameras in and out of the courtroom, Kabrin is fortunate that her services are still required—some courts, most notably the U.S. Supreme Court, have a TV blackout



Carole Kabrin in her studio.

policy. Chief Justice William Rehnquist has been quoted as saying that if the justices did not look good on camera, "it would lessen to a certain extent some of the mystique and moral authority" of the court. Another reason for the court's policy is perceived to be the justices' desire to guard their personal privacy. Such reasoning is most welcome to an artist like Kabrin, and it is keeping her afloat—even if just barely so.

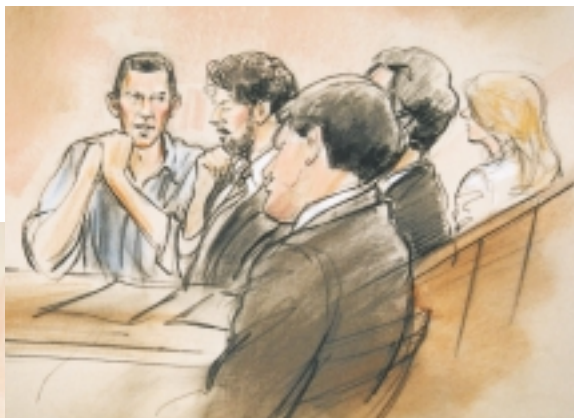
Hers is a true test of survival because court artists are hard to come by in the Detroit area. "I'm pretty much one of the only artists working," she says. A persistent and energetic woman, Kabrin knew from an early age that she wanted to become a portrait artist. As a child, she was fascinated with a portrait artist who later became a courtroom artist for a TV station. That gave her the inspira-

tion to do the same. She started to train for it by working at a bar, drawing patrons who always appreciated her work.

Kabrin, who has a Master of Fine Art degree in drawing from Wayne State University, says many opportunities came through her alma mater, including her start in television news in 1975 drawing courtroom coverage of teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa's disappearance for WWJ-TV, an NBC affiliate station. She recalls how difficult it was to capture on paper some of the main characters in the trial because of barricades. "I had from the time they came out of the elevator to the time they went into the courtroom to draw these guys. I devised a way of pretty much tying my board to me so that I could run after these people. Once, I drew them crossing the street into Lafayette and I didn't get killed. I was walking backwards and drawing!"

Artists covering a trial have many pre-occupations. Uppermost in their minds is whether they can see well enough to produce a good likeness of the individuals involved. Often, multiple sketches are needed so the story can be told with varied and interesting visuals. Speed, accuracy, flexibility, and the ability to stay focussed under rapidly changing circumstances are essentials in this very specialized field. "You have to be very aware of which of the people are in the story, how much time you have left, are you getting everybody that you need to get, and does it look like that person? You've got to draw well with all of this going on... I am very careful. The way that I draw somebody is what the public thinks about this person—so, I'm very, very respectful of the fact that everybody's innocent until proven guilty. I used to get yelled at for making my defendant look too good. When I was doing Noriega, my producer was really angry—make him look uglier, he's not that good looking, there are pock marks on his face!"

To view Kabrin's artwork
contact her at (313) 561-7291

Oklahoma City bombing trial.

Judge Cooper also pointed out that many courts have replaced traditional court reporters with video systems. “Any media wanting access need only to hook into the signal or purchase a complete tape of as much of the proceedings as they wish. Because so much of what is on television is modified to enhance its ‘entertainment value,’ it is probably even more important to share

with the public the reality of what is happening in the courtrooms of our country.”

The appearance of cameras in the courtroom has brought the end precipitously close for many artists. On the other hand, despite early doubts, many in the legal world have learned to handle the new technology in the

courts very well. “A lot of fears about cameras in the courtroom have proven to be unfounded,” said Judge Stephen C. Cooper of the 46th District Court. “After a short period in the beginning of the trial, in most cases, the attorneys generally tend to forget about the cameras. Attorneys, witnesses, and judges quickly ignore them to concentrate on their respective responsibilities.”

As courtrooms incorporate more technology in their day-to-day operations, Carole Kabrin must turn elsewhere to sustain her career and her love of art. More portraits, fine art, and participation in gallery shows, as well as taking the time to learn something more current like graphic design, are all options. Still, there are days when expectations linger. “I’m hoping it [courtroom work] will swing back the other way,” she said. In the meantime, she keeps busy in her studio near I-75 and East Grand Boulevard doing portraits and keeping a sharp ear for the ring of her cell phone, in case it is a court assignment. ♦

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Kabrin recalls that it was very tough to cover the sentencing at the McVeigh trial. “There was so much energy in the room before the sentencing,” she said. She found it hard to get his expression because she could not see him well from her seat. She also remembers that he kept his hand over his mouth and did not show any remorse. Working at a frenetic pace, she produced 10 drawings. With the help of an assistant, she was able to color them just in time for the evening news. Kabrin describes some of the trials she has covered, like the Mike Tyson case, as “electrically exciting.” She was particularly eager to do a trial involving a U.S. president—so the second Whitewater hearing was memorable to her. “They had a videotape of the president and I had to draw that. That was very exciting to me.”

Kabrin’s artwork has been described as “excellent” by Judge Avern L. Cohn of the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, who owns two of her sketches. “I believe strongly in courtroom artists because people should know what’s going on in the courtroom and that’s the only way they can find out in federal court because cameras are forbidden,” he said. Judge Cohn also thinks that “courtroom sketch artists and their work are historic and will always be with us. I just hope the talent is passed on.”



Hearing in April 2002 for Zaccharias Moussaoui in connection with charges related to the September 11 attacks