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Brush thumping: Painter's 'electrosonic' art is a landscape of sight, sound

By JOE NICKELL of the Missoulian

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Preview

***Marcus E. Brown** will perform a series of electrosonic paintings this Friday, Aug. 4, at the Loft, located at 424 N. Higgins. The free show starts at 9 p.m. and features musicians Damon Metzner and Eric Bigger. The show will coincide with the opening of an exhibit of photographs of Rowan Metzner, entitled "Utopia, State, and Anarchy."*

Marcus E. Brown is accustomed to people being confused about what, exactly, he does.

While the New Orleans-born, Portland, Ore.-based artist doesn't exactly force the ambiguity, he does seem to get a kick out of the semantic mind-twisters that his work inspires.

"When I say to people that I'm going to play a painting, or I'm going to paint a song, people are like, what do you mean?" says Brown with a laugh. "They think I'm being metaphorical. But when they see what I do, they realize I'm not."

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In fact, Brown's work is equal parts sonic and visual art, a blending of two traditionally disparate disciplines into a single, unique form of performance art. Employing custom-designed, microphone-equipped paintbrushes and canvases connected to various digital effects and amplifiers, Brown has pioneered an art form he calls electrosonic painting, whereby the creation of a work of visual art is not only watched, but heard - even felt - by those in attendance.

The result is that Brown might just be the only painter in America today who legitimately hopes that people will dance to his paintings.

And in a strange twist, he might be the only painter whose finished products - the paintings that remain after he creates them - represent only a part of the art he aims to create.

"Even if I'm not making a mark on the canvas and only making a sound - by tapping on the brush, for example - it's still a part of the process, so it's still a part of the work," says Brown, 24. "But obviously, that's not something you see when I'm finished with the painting. It's only something you can experience when I'm painting it."

Brown's particular - and, admittedly, peculiar - approach to art was borne out of a seemingly divergent set of youthful interests. A born tinkerer with a musical ear, Brown has long been intrigued by how instruments work, how they are amplified, and how their form affects the music they produce. As a high school student focused on visual art at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, those interests led Brown to occasionally sneak off to hang out with the music students.

"I used to get in trouble with my visual art teachers because I'd be spending so much time in the jazz room," says Brown. "I had kind of a torn deal going on between being a musician and artist, so I finally started saying I'm both and nobody can argue with me."

During his years as an undergrad at the Kansas City Art Institute, Brown began focusing on bringing his interests together through sculpture - and, in particular, through building objects that could be used to make sound or music. Over the years, he built numerous percussion and string instruments, including a massive bass guitar built over a resonating pond; and a roomful of life-sized, sculpted figures that utilized galvanic skin response sensors - a technology used by Scientologists in spiritual counseling - to produce interactive, abstractly musical sounds when in proximity to people.

By connecting a hyper-sensitive microphone to a stethoscope, he even made it possible to turn the internal sounds of his own body - the pulse of his heart, the resonance in his sinuses - into musical instruments of a sort.

"My process (of making art) starts with making the tools to make the art," says Brown. "I'll solder something together, do some drilling on some wood, put these things together, plug them into an amp and play music for hours - banging, scratching, breaking things, sawing pieces off. That's a lot of my process.

"You know," Brown adds, "a lot of artists like to have their studio time be quiet time. A lot of my studio work is really, really noisy."

Brown first conceived of his electrosonic painting technique as he pondered the subtle noises that were involved in the process of painting.

"When you're painting, there are all these sounds - the sound of the brush scratching the canvas or dabbing paint - but they are definitely part of the experience of painting."

Brown decided to see what might happen if he amplified those sounds. Typical of his unorthodox approach to art-making, he started out by installing a microphone onto a barbecue skewer, and painting on a canvas with that.

"I liked that one because it allowed me to scratch like a deejay with a turntable, and you could really hear it well," explains Brown.

Over time, Brown has developed a number of other techniques to produce sound as he paints. Sometimes he installs a surface-mounted microphone onto the back of the canvas he is painting. Sometimes he uses small microphones in traditional paintbrushes. All of it feeds through a digital sampler, allowing Brown to create looped beats that he can scratch, dab and splash over.

These days, he is even performing with other musicians. For his appearance in Missoula this week, he'll be joined by Portland-based bassist/trombonist Eric Bigger and Missoula's own Damon Metzner (an old friend of Brown's from their youthful days in New Orleans) on drums.

Although his process of electrosonic painting is laden with technology, Brown says he owes as much to traditional Voodoo religious practices as to modern-day techno turntablists.

"I always relate what I do to Voodoo mask-makers or craftsmen, because they consider their process to be a religious one," says Brown. "I really consider the process of making art very spiritual."

Indeed, Brown is most philosophical not about the paintings he produces, or the particular aesthetic principles that he follows, but about the social function of his art-making process.

"I'm really concerned about the legacy of the visual arts and of music living on in America, so I feel like the best way I can do that is interact with the community and do as much as possible to prove art's value," says Brown. "And the best way I can do that is by creating something that really has to be experienced."

"There's something that's lost after I'm finished, even though the painting is a record of part of it," Brown continues. "That's what I find most valuable about it: I can never replicate that work, that experience."

If that makes Brown's work hard to classify, all the better, he says.

"There's so much classification going on in this world that people tend to forget that everything's connected in the first place," says Brown. "Ultimately, beneath it all, we're all mostly similar. I'm not trying to make art for the artists necessarily. I don't think that'll help art live on in America. I'm making art that people can feel like they were part of, and that helps connect them."

Scratch by scratch, tap after tap, Marcus Brown is smearing the boundaries between music and painting, between the timeless and the fleeting, even - he hopes - between you and me.

"Art is spiritual, it's science, it's history, it's everything," says Brown. "Art is a prayer in making."

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