

Taking It to the Streets

James Erickson makes the invisible visible by blurring the lines between art and life.

By Sally Ruth Bourrie Posted 5/07/08



By painting on cardboard boxes joined into 8-foot by 10-foot “canvases” using materials such as spray paint and food leftovers, James Erickson (Studio Art '08) restores the dignity of his humble materials and gives a loud voice to people who are often invisible.*Photo by Blake Fitch*

 [James Erickson slideshow](#)

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

-- Martin Luther King

"Being an artist is a decision to use the creative mind that you've been gifted with in all areas of your life," says James Erickson (Studio Art '08). For Erickson, whose work expresses his strong social conscience, that means events in the community balanced with the restorative privacy of painting in the studio. "I believe in painting — the objective, tangible object of painting," he says. "I think that's powerful."

Erickson's work is antithetical to the idea that art is the province of museums and galleries. He has welcomed the gamut of Charlottesville's citizens in handing out free ice cream on hot summer days and invited passersby to paint with him on the Downtown Mall. To make his paintings, he uses, to put it euphemistically, nonarchival materials – cardboard boxes, spray paint and house paint. "I've seen him paint even with melted ice cream," says Art Professor Megan Marlatt.

It is a way of being an artist that comes out of a tradition of public art, a tradition many people today have never experienced. The 20th century was dominated by Modernism, whose intense, almost incestuous self-examination drove many people away from high art. "Modernism has this idea that there's this generic public and there's this elite public that's going to understand what they're doing. Marcel Duchamp used to say that there were about three people in New Jersey who understood his work," says Marlatt. "With James, he's much more interested in having art affect people on a real, day-to-day basis and an audience in places that art doesn't often reach, that it wouldn't be just this activity where people go to a museum and look at the art."

But Erickson's art is not only about public gestures or unusual materials. Much of it, he says, falls under an umbrella of "lifting up the low. The Bible says, 'The first will be last and the last will be first.'"

So who does the young man from Detroit's rough, impoverished streets paint?
Charlottesville's homeless people.

At 8 feet by 10 feet, the faces that look directly out of the "canvas" are edgy and enormous. "It's a condition of humanity that people can't get past superficial differences," Erickson says. "I believe that the human being is, clearly stated, the most magnificent thing you can see on this earth. I sit on the curb with these men and I watch people walk by and ignore them, or it's like they're part of the stationary architecture. There's something wrong with that, absolutely wrong with not acknowledging the greatest creation on this earth."

So Erickson paints them so large, in colors so bright and using gestures so broad that these paintings — and their subjects — cannot be overlooked. “The large scale gives them a voice — a loud voice,” he says, adding that, as he brings his homeless sitters to light, he shows his viewers a dark truth about the world in which we live.



And he paints them on “canvases” of cardboard boxes bonded together, ripped and torn, materials used by homeless people every day, materials that themselves echo the weathered condition of those who live on the streets.

He has found kinship in such predecessors as the 1960s Italian Arte Povera movement, whose artists used nontraditional, often impermanent, materials available for free or very cheap, as a metaphor for elevating underprivileged social classes and to state clearly that their objects were not intended to be stored for centuries in a museum.

Erickson pulled some of his “paints” — soy sauce, chocolate sauce and others — from the studio trash. “That ritual of picking from the trash and adding it to something beautiful, it helped me,” he said, adding that German artist Anselm Kiefer also worked with the idea of restoring the dignity of poor materials.

Erickson has found these connections, an underpinning and context for his inclinations, at U.Va. Marlatt has long experience working on murals and in communities, including Harlem, so when he came to her with the idea of working with homeless people, she could help. In addition, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory Howard Singerman introduced Erickson to sculptor John Ahearn, who has made the poverty-stricken South Bronx his home and its people his subjects, completely integrating his art and his life.

Erickson paints only people he has befriended and knows. “I don’t think it makes much sense to paint someone who you have never met if you are trying to capture the essence of their individuality,” Erickson writes in his senior thesis, *Translational Endeavors*. “This would reduce portrait painting to another form of exploitation. The figures I choose to paint are not part of an agenda.” Erickson has brought these homeless men into his home, helped find them jobs and connected them with local churches — and some of his viewers have reached out to them as well.

Still, he says, “I’m touching on a subject I have no immediate solution for and I’m very conscious of that. I’m working towards a change in how we look at and judge these people in our community. This is a very slow process of refining that takes place in the heart.”

The portraits have a very personal resonance as well. For a young man who grew up in poverty, lived with violence, faced jail time and fought back suicide, making a person’s likeness is a profound gesture. In high school, Erickson’s art teacher/track coach/mentor/father figure had painted his portrait, then hung it in the school library. “Him painting me and the experience I had — I realized the experience was an act of love.”

And that’s where Kiefer, and his teacher, conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, come in again, speaking to arguably the most overriding aspect of Erickson’s work: that art matters. For, in broken, impoverished post-World War II Germany, Beuys, and later Kiefer, believed that art could heal.

“There are students I have that can draw really well and I would like them to be art majors, but they decided they’d rather be a claims adjuster or a rocket scientist or go to the Darden

School," says Marlatt. "There are occasionally students like James who really want to be artists, who really feel like art means something, that art should be meaningful to people — not just a certain group of people but many people, and he wants to affect the world with his art-making."

For Erickson, that means being active beyond the studio as well. In his thesis he writes, "I do not sit alone in a studio and naively paint blissful images of angels and heaven. I wake up each morning in our broken world and make a leap of faith."

Through study, he has found affirmation in his predecessor Beuys, who planted 7,000 trees as an artistic act and believed that everyone was creative. Another movement called Fluxus, with which Beuys was related in its early years, embraced events and included their audience in them. Fluxus reached its peak of activity in the 1970s; members also included Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik.

Erickson and his friends explored inviting the public to participate in their creative activities with "Jay and Fred's Ice Cream Project" last summer when they passed out ice cream from their pick-up truck. Ultimately named for two homeless men who joined them to help, the project was funded by several churches and documented on film. By summer's end, a wide array of community members filled the truck bed, chipping away, if not dismantling social barriers. "Deciding to use creative thinking to enhance society proved to be a rewarding aesthetic experience," wrote Erickson.

Meeting Jay and Fred led to Erickson's involvement with Charlottesville's homeless, and painting them.

Erickson's senior show will reflect another public event with paintings made by Charlottesville community members as part of his Downtown Painting Project. When the weather is nice, he can be found on the Downtown Mall with a "Come Paint!" sign, cardboard "canvases" and paints. Young and old, and people from all racial and cultural backgrounds and social strata come together to make art with him.

What's next? Maybe a fifth year at U.Va., maybe work combining art and seminary. For the short term, he will make a piece from 40 pairs of worn-out track shoes donated by his track team to "somehow express the dedication and passion required to be successful in a sport that measures the body's ability to deal with pain and discomfort."

And he is painting Fast Eddie, a homeless man he will paint as quickly as possible. He says, too, the next step is to gain humility by discarding his own ego and style and ask his sitters how they think he should paint them.

This is what it's all about, says Marlatt, who advises students, "Why don't you invent your own problems and solve them? That's what research is, in any field, not just the arts, it's inventing that problem that needs to be worked out. It's not just finding the answers, it's finding the questions."

James Erickson was selected a 2008 winner of the prestigious Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation award for service. To learn more, click [here](#).

Sally Ruth Bourrie is editor of A&S Online and Arts & Sciences magazine.

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