



Art Unbound

Bloomington artist works outside the squares

by Joel Pierson, H&L

Some artists wear berets on their heads to express their artistic individuality. James Campbell sports a beret on his wall to express his.

Several, in fact. The painted hats are part of the diverse and eye-catching collection of mixed-media artworks that adorn his home. The idea was born of his wondering one day if he could paint on the fabric of the berets, just as he had painted on many different materials. The answer was yes, and the result—as with so many of his projects—speaks of a mind unbounded by the conventions of a rectangular canvas.

"I like to experiment," he says of his artistic endeavors. "Not experimenting is not learning."

James came to Bloomington by way of both coasts.

Born in 1950 in Grant's Pass, Ore., he ended up in the Air Force

during the Vietnam War era, after high school. After his tour was over, James attended Montserrat School of Visual Art near Boston, but he stayed in art school for only one year. Boston was a very expensive place to live, so he packed up and returned to the West Coast, in search of gainful employment. He found a print shop that needed graphics done and told the owner, "I can do that."

Thus began his career in the print industry.

Within three years, the interest in furthering his education took over again, and he and his wife went back to Massachusetts, so he could return to art school. The decision was fueled by the desire to work with a faculty member named Paul Scott who came out of the abstract expressionist era.

"He was a marvelous painter and a good teacher," James says. "I sat in on a couple of his classes. But I didn't have the prerequisites. I went and talked to Paul Scott, trying to get into



Artist James Campbell stands with one of his 3-D pieces. Photos by David Snodgrass

his class. He looked over my portfolio and said, 'You can go to school if you want, or you can practice.' I figured, 'Okay, I can practice.'"

Through a series of coincidences, the Campbells ended up in Bloomington in 1975. The couple started a family and have lived here ever since.

"We knew we wanted to be in a university town," James says, "with the diversity of population that it brings. Bloomington felt right. I went back to the print business, spent another 12 to 14 years in commercial printing, doing design work, working for established printers. Following that, I freelanced for a couple of years."

During the years that he was working in the print and exhibit businesses, James would spend late nights developing his sculpting and painting skills, to keep creative balance and unwind from the work day.



Today, James is a full-time independent artist, though he still does some freelance graphic design work as needed. Among his recent achievements, James was honored by having his work placed in an exhibition from Sept. 23 to Nov. 23 with Manhattan Arts International. As an exhibiting artist, James was an Award of Excellence winner in the "Art That Lifts Our Spirits" exhibition.



Contact James and see more of his portfolio via his website, www.campbellarts.net.



Double Excellence

Unlike most artists, James excels in both painting and abstract sculpture. His decision was born in art school, where he learned of the work of Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella, artists who were breaking the bounds of the rectangular canvas.

It made him realize, "Things in this world aren't square, except the things we make square. Why do I have to be bounded by that? I felt I could contribute more by breaking out of that, stretching the way people see things. As time went on, I found other materials, other ways of doing it."

His sculpture is influenced by the work of 20th-century English sculptor Henry Moore, who was well known for his massive bronze

semi-abstract figures. Moore's style inspired the predominant shapes in James' sculptures.

Apart from canvas (and the occasional beret), James uses a number of different materials to create his sculptures, including wood, metals, and glass. Two favorite materials are high-density urethane (a carvable foam board) and cold-cast bronze (a resin mixed with a metallic powder). The result, as the photos accompanying this article attest, comes alive in three vibrant dimensions. The material also welcomes paints in a range of hues.

James adds, "I like working with different materials and different painting techniques. A lot of recent pieces are influenced by the relationship with landscape. I always liked maps, and I see a disconnect in the way our minds see things. We have certain expectations in our thought patterns. Reality can impinge on that."

He acknowledges that the artistic process often relies on discovery. "Some things happen by accident. An art teacher once told me, 'Half of being an artist is having an idea. The other half is knowing what to do when it all goes to hell.' There's always something to be gotten, even from something that goes wrong."

Creating abstract works carries its own challenges in a world where people take things at face value and the Internet can tell us in seconds what something is. James acknowledges, "I realize that everybody who looks at a piece of artwork comes to that experience with their own background information and filters. Everybody's going to have a different answer. I'd rather hear what they have to say about it than have them ask me what I think about it. I painted it, I gave it a title, I hung it on the wall; now it's up to you to interpret it."

For somebody to enjoy a piece of artwork, he knows they have to connect with it in some way. "It doesn't matter whether you're looking at a landscape or a piece of abstract art. They both contain various symbols, all these nuances of color choices and crispness or fogginess. All these different things that go into creating an image, that move perceptions a little bit."

Art leaves a legacy. What does James Campbell want his legacy to be, hundreds of years from now?

"I want to be thought of as an innovator of sorts. Often paintings are thought of as pictures and sculptures as objects. I would like to think that I have helped transcend that barrier. The human brain is a marvelous thing; you use words, I use images to produce a stimulus. I like poking a brain to see what it will come up with, especially my own."