

## **On the Cusp of Everything** ---- *Lucia Llano*

Sam Berg, a radio-television-film senior at the University of Texas, has been making art since he was a child. It all started with comic strips of mad scientists, demons and best friends.

More than a decade later, he sits under the Pfluger Pedestrian Bridge next to Lady Bird Lake on a Sunday afternoon to sell his framed drawings for \$20 a piece. By the edge of the sidewalk, a long string of black-and-white art pieces lean against the bridge railings, their etched lines swirling and bending into each other. Meanwhile, people in straw beach hats and swim trunks smile and glance curiously at the drawings as they speed by.

“How's it going guys? Thanks for looking at my drawings! I love sharing them,” Berg says, smiling when their eyes meet. “Ask for any of their stories. I can tell you all about it.”

The inky faces of the characters he draws blink back at the passersby, sometimes with an abundance of eyes, other times, with a lack of them. In one drawing, two towering robots fall in love, their hearts connected by power lines, one of their heads fuming with exhaust. Beside it, there's a self-portrait of Berg's hand, but it's severed and singular, disturbing the surface of a glassy, smooth lake. Many of his drawings sit side-by-side handwritten musings, often ending with “much love.”

With graduation right around the corner, Berg is preparing for a lifetime of doing what he loves.

“It's a common question, ‘So what else do you want to do with your life?’ Or like, ‘Where do you hope to go from here?’” Berg says. “And I always am thinking, I'm in the middle of a really cool city, I'm showing people (my art) and I'm able to pay my rent doing that. What else would I want to do with my life? There's no other purpose. This is it.”

Berg says he's spent the past year seeing if he can make a living from his art. Just this weekend, he pulled in \$500 from his street markets.

“I (have done) the math and technically I can pay my rent doing this,” Berg says. “So after I graduate this summer, I'm gonna do this. I'm doing what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life.”

Berg says he makes art because he can't stop himself from it. It's what he loves to do most in the world.

“No one has to care about the images I'm making, but for some reason people do. And even if they (didn't), I would still be making them,” Berg says. “It doesn't matter because I have to, it's just what comes out of me. I can't help but draw all the time. I didn't choose to have this brain or this body at this moment in time. I didn't choose any of these things. It's just occurring completely outside of my control. And I love knowing that, feeling that, experiencing that.”

He says when he's drawing, he simply feels happy. And when he's not, it feels similar to needing to crack his neck.

“That's what it feels like. It's like, ‘Oh, I gotta stretch. I gotta release that. I gotta make art’,” Berg says. “Something wants to be resolved in a harmonious chord.”

More than creation, Berg says the biggest reason for sharing his art is to channel openness, generate conversation and ground people in the present. He sees art as a powerful catalyst for the connection everyone craves and an excuse to allow people to linger and talk about bigger things.

“The only thing that's ever actually happening is what's happening right now. Right now. That's it.” Berg says. “And when you create these interesting images, you can call people's attention to the awareness of the present moment, and they can fully ingratiate themselves into what's going on right now. You create a little magical spark in them.”

Berg says the purpose of him selling his art on the street isn't in making money, but rather in the feeling of sharing. He says it makes people happy to see him sharing. Even when people don't stop to talk, they smile at him and his work. He's noticed that being open about his art often encourages others to show him theirs. Berg says this feeling of satisfaction proved to him that this was at the heart of what he wants to do with his life.

Besides selling on the street, Berg has taken to sharing his art on coffee shop walls like at Medici Roasting directly across from UT campus. He also started an Instagram account, Open Journal, in 2020 that has gathered more than 2,000 followers wanting to see his thoughts and artwork. He says he started Open Journal to destigmatize the idea of sharing vulnerabilities.

“It's called Open Journal because I think there's this intrinsic sense we have that hurts a lot of us,” Berg says. “At the very bottom of our hearts, we believe that what is secret is somehow the truest version of ourselves. Like I wouldn't want to tell anyone this because it's most me.”

By sharing his art, Berg says he hopes to get as close as possible to completely opening up his true self for others to see and remind people that authenticity is always an option.

“The more that we can embrace this, the more deeply we can experience love and connection and life together,” Berg says. “But so many of us carry around this giant weight of feeling (like) no one really understands (us) because (we) keep it hidden ... The whole idea of Open Journal is to say ‘Hey, they opened up a journal. Let's listen together. Let's hear each other.’ And it's how we get to have the best friends we'll ever have. Or the best things we'll ever create.”

36-year-old Jeremy Carter moved to Austin four years ago. He works for a meditation app called Waking Up and is one of Berg's closest friends.

Three months ago, though, Carter was just another passerby. While wandering down South Congress Avenue, like he often spends his free time, reading a book at Mañana coffee shop and listening to busking musicians on the sidewalk, he stumbled into Berg selling his art. Even though he had nowhere to be, he almost didn't stop, avoiding eye contact like many others as he strolled past the long line of pieces on the side of the road, backdropped by the sage green walls of Jo's Coffee and the ‘I love you so much’ graffiti.

But in his peripheral vision, he caught a glance at Berg's art.

“And for a moment I was like, ‘Oh wait, that looks more interesting than usual.’ I kind of stopped and just leaned down to stare at it for a second,” Carter says. “And then Sam, in his very Sam-way, prompted me in somehow. It was just a very simple, innocent question.”

But Carter says he got caught in Berg's “spider web” of conversation, and that innocent question turned into an hour and a half standing on the sidewalk.

“He knew what he was doing,” Carter says. “It was one of the most natural conversations I've ever had in my life.”

Carter says they talked about everything the universe could offer: the psychedelic flavor of Berg's art, meditation, love, truth, awareness, concentration and how to live a meaningful life.

“So you can imagine how strange that is. I was just walking down the sidewalk and there's this artist there and within 30 minutes we're like, ‘Oh yeah, the meaning of everything, that's what we need to talk about,’” Carter says.

As crowds of tourists walked down the street, bypassing them to enter the boutique shops, Carter says he could imagine them catching fragments of their conversation and thinking ‘What the hell are those guys on?’”

Now, they spend time together once a week. Sometimes they go to Thank God for People, a live music and open mic event where people are encouraged to share anything they have to share. Other times they sit on the couch at Carter's place making "bad music" on guitars he can barely play. Often, they hang out at Berg's art markets under the bridge. They sit side-by-side on the rocks. Berg makes dark, spiraling lines on the stark white sketchbook on his lap. Carter flips the page of his book "An Awakened Life" to the bolded chapter title, "The Capacity for Love." For hours, they share mango juice and turkey sandwiches, ask each other what they're thinking and talk about everything.

Carter says it's clear that Berg is not just selling art, but rather creating a space to show people the potential for true connection that every conversation holds and offering them a moment of presence.

"It's kind of a refreshing reminder that as human beings, we can just be open and talk about important things," Carter says. "Why don't we have those kinds of conversations with people more? Why isn't that naturally the way we have conversation?"

Carter says Berg's dedication to openness, presence and connection is infectious. Lately, big, open conversations have started to feel normal to him.

"I'll be walking along somewhere with (Berg) and I'll be paying more attention to what's going on in the environment or what's beautiful, just because he's there," Carter says. "I know he's an artist and he's constantly looking at things and pulling (them) apart visually. And so I think I just kind of, I'm able to absorb that a little bit. I draw very badly myself. I have two guitars that I can't play, but hanging out with an artist, it's almost like you can't help but take on the artist's perspective in a tiny way."