

Artists putting windows in a whole new light

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SAN FRANCISCO — Shades of blue, yellow and pink work their way into every wrinkle and crack of Chris Duke's hands.

Duke is working on a commissioned piece of a nearby Sicilian deli in the sunshine at Washington Square Park. He uses oil paints and pastels on recycled windows to create beautiful portraits of San Francisco, as he has been doing since becoming a permanent resident of the city about 20 years ago.

"I'm the window cat, I guess you could say," he said.

The brightly colored Victorian homes that line the streets of the city draw thousands of tourists every year. It's estimated that there are tens of thousands of Victorian style houses built between 1849 and 1915 in SF, all of which have needed remodeling. That's where Duke comes in, snatching the windows up from alleys, dumps and basements. You can find them anywhere really, Duke said.

"Someone will call me and tell me, 'There's a bunch of windows over here on such and such street,' and I'll go with a truck or whatever I have, and see if I can't get them all," he said.

Duke began his endeavors in painting 30 years ago on canvas and was heavily influenced by post-impressionists like Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. His friend's mother bought him his first set of paints as a young man while he still lived in his home state of Kentucky.

"I used to go out in the field all the time, I used to just go out and sit and write, and I told my friend on day that I was going to start painting when I go out, too," Duke said. "His mom bought me a set of paints and I haven't looked back since."

For 10 years, Duke was largely satisfied sticking to canvas, but even in his early days he kept a bin for discarded objects he wanted to create a piece on. He had found a window on one of his rummaging expeditions, but put it aside

for a whole year before there was nothing else in his entire studio to paint on.

"I painted on it and I was so mad that I waited a whole year because I loved what I saw," Duke said.

That first window started a revolution within Duke's creative spirit. He was a musician by trade – according to Hoodline, he grew up in a musically gifted family of 14 – and has played the guitar and sang for the majority of his life. Duke's intention when he moved to the city was to pursue a career in blues and jazz, but has largely left that behind. He can still be heard tooling around on the guitar, accordion or an instrument he made from found objects. But he had found his calling and wanted to paint the next window as soon as he had finished the last.

"I knew I wanted to do it right away so I went out searching for windows. I didn't know they would be as easy to find as they are," Duke said. "It took me maybe a week, maybe not that long, before I found my next window. I started searching for them and I found that they were all over the place."

His unique style and material has garnered a fairly large following. Several years ago, he began mentoring his current painting partner, Amy Starr. Starr said she was instantly attracted to Duke's work when a mutual friend introduced them.

"I was a mess when I first tried, but he's such an amazing mentor, he'll just take the hardest thing I'm struggling with and go 'One, two, three,' and I'm like 'Oh!,'" she said.

Starr gained previous experience working on uncommon canvasses when she worked as a makeup artist. After her daughter was born, she could no longer work the long, stressful hours required of her and she retired from the profession. It didn't take long for her to miss working with colors and making something pretty, she said, so she enrolled in Sadie Valeri Atelier painting classes. Her now ex-boyfriend told her she needed to draw for two weeks so her eyes could stop over correcting what she was drawing and only then she would know if she was an artist.



Photos by Polina Sarana | psarana@msudenver.edu

Chris Duke takes a break from painting and plays music on an accordion.

"I stuck with it for two weeks, and wouldn't you know, I painting like a crazy beast on canvas and stuff," Starr said.

The pair now work out of Duke's truck anywhere with good sunshine and pedestrian traffic. Places such as Dolores Park, Alto Plaza, Washington Square Park and Alamo Square Park are top earners. Although much of their work is done separately, they have begun to collaborate on some pieces, which they then sign "DnA," for Duke and Amy. They each have their individual strong suits and inspirations – Duke is stronger with composition while Starr is better with color choices, she said. If either of them sees the other struggling with something and thinks they could make it stronger, they then begin to work on it together. About 20-30 percent of their finished pieces are done collaboratively.

"I like it, I think our best paintings are DnA paintings," she said.

Some of the larger pieces take hours or days to finish, limiting their turnout. Time is money for the pair of artists, however their motivations are very different. Duke said his average is about one to two paintings on a good day when he gets time to sit down and meaningfully paint. Starr, on the other hand, is desperate to turn out pieces as quickly as possible to earn money for her own place. She currently lives with Duke after having been transient for a period of time during which she lost custody of her 10 year old daughter, Gabrielle. She now only gets to see Gabrielle once a week for an hour.

"An hour a week. So I paint non-stop because as soon as I get enough done, I can have her back," Starr said as she began to cry. "People are like, cause I'll paint all day and late into the night, they say 'Wow, you have great work ethic,' and I'm like 'Nope, I just miss my daughter.'"

Duke's motivations are a little more traditional of the typical sidewalk artist: it's not about the money, it's about creating.

"It's definitely not about making a living, even though you've got to make a living. It's always gonna be first and foremost about the creative, not even the expression," he said. "It's not something that I'm expressing myself doing. It's extraction; I'm extracting information through this process."

The bed of Duke's Ford pickup truck is perpetually stacked with windows. The old house paint peels away from rails and the panes are filled with shocking colors depicting inconspicuous details of the city. In a place like San Francisco that breeds creativity, it's a challenge not to stumble upon an artist testing the boundaries of creative capacity.

"Everything you do, I feel, you have to make it on the strength of your own ability, really. They say, 'It's not what you know, but who you know,' but the way I see it is, it's not who you know, but what you do with what you know," Duke said. "You gotta give it all, because whoever you know, they can't help you if you don't have enough to pull it off."



Amy Starr draws with oil paint on an old window..