

TAKING THEIR ART ON THE ROAD

Through bone-chilling rain and searing heat, thin crowds and crass comments, they come back year after year to set up their tents and tables, socialize a bit and try to sell their wares. Meet the soldiers of the summer art fair circuit.

BY PATTY LANOUE STEARNS PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH CONLEY



Pat Custer Denison

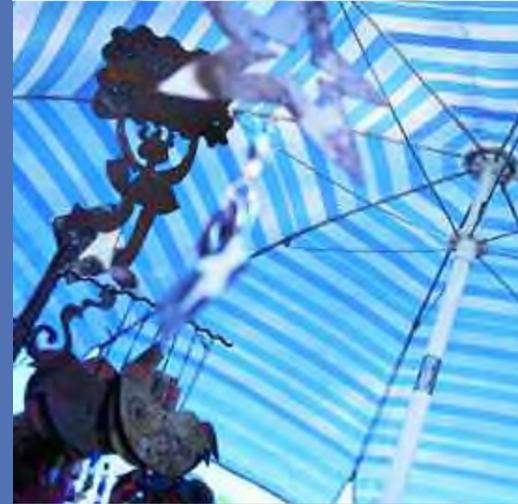
They spend the winter turning clay and steel into sculpture, twigs and stones into home decor, skins and fabric into one-of-a-kind fashion. Come spring, they carefully pack up their sculptures and paintings, weavings and furniture, and take to the highways. It's the life of an art fair artist—fraught with difficulty and distance, but not without reward.

Many, like Benzie County ceramicist and watercolorist Pat Custer Denison, have been at it more than a quarter-century, starting when they were fresh out of art school. Over the years, they've shared the joys of friendship, the closeness of the arts community, and have watched their children grow up together.

"I've been doing this since I was 22. A lot of years," says Denison. "Now that everybody on the art fair circuit seems to be in their 50s, I see fewer kids, but when we started out in the '70s, there were babies and art fair children everywhere, and they all seem to have grown up to be accountants or engineers—anything other than artists."

Indeed, it's tough to find a new face in the show. "I like to think it's because this life is so hard and they just don't have the wherewithal," says Denison. "But I think it's just because we're still here, clogging up the works, and the more years you've got into doing this, the more experience you have getting your slides together, getting your act together, getting in the show."

It takes energy, commitment and chutzpah. But they're driven. It's their heart, their soul, their raison d'être. Take a glimpse at art fair life through the eyes of the artists at one of the premier shows on the Northern Michigan circuit, the Suttons Bay Art Festival.



Siouxan E. Miller

Eleven years ago, when she was only 23, Siouxan Miller tried the art fair circuit for the first time. It was a rough introduction to an artist's life on the road: "After that summer I decided I would never ever do this again," says the spunky redhead, sitting cross legged under the only shade tree among the booths. "I didn't know how to respond to people saying, 'I don't get it. What is it?' or 'I don't like this.' I wasn't prepared to deal with that in a diplomatic way."

But with age comes more tolerance. Last year, at age 33, Miller was still the youngest artist at the Suttons Bay show, but she's a veteran now, and has developed a thicker skin. And she has found that art fairs are the best way to meet her customers and educate them about her labor-intensive images, created on watercolor paper using two alternative photographic processes—cyanotype, or blue-printing, and gum bichromate, which combines watercolor pigment and a light-sensitive chemical.

Miller, who graduated from Wayne State University in 1990 with a degree in ceramics and a minor in photography, admits that taking her work on the road has drawn criticism from friends, who hint that she has somehow sold out—that doing art fairs lessens the quality of her work. Miller isn't convinced. "For me, I'm offering museum-quality work, I just happen to be going to the people and finding them instead of waiting for them to find me."

The reward for her effort is having somebody understand her vision. "I had somebody make this comment: 'The more that I look at your work, the more I see.' That's my motto about my work. That's why I do what I do. I layer information, because I want the viewer to be constantly going, 'Oh, and look at that,' undoing each layer and getting deeper and deeper into it."

So the art fair circuit has become part of her lifestyle. Miller and her husband, Bill Lucas, do a fair every other weekend in the summer. They call themselves art carnies, "traveling town to town with our wares instead of elephants," says Miller. "We love that part of it. Also, you get to go to different places like Suttons Bay—I mean, it's an incredible location. You get to kind of have half-vacation, half-work."

Miller is fortunate that Lucas, a computer programmer, is gainfully employed. "My art is supporting itself, but if he wasn't in my life, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing," she admits. With price points between \$395 and \$1,000, Miller acknowledges she couldn't afford her own work. On the other hand, she knows that sticking with it will eventually pay off: She's getting her art out there, and she's learning to be patient.

Miller knows if somebody looks at a piece today and didn't



Siouxan Miller



purchase it, that she's planting seeds for the future. "They need to see a work a few times because it's something they're going to live with for a long time. It's a rare customer who comes in and says 'I love it, I want it, here you go, here's the money.' It takes time."

Siouxan Miller is based out of Ferndale, MI. 248-398-8107

Jerry Berta and Madeline Kaczmarczyk

During the 27 years they've been on the art-fair circuit, this artistic duo have not only made a living selling their ceramics at shows around the country—they've managed to do it and support a family, children Amy and Zachary.

"We've done a good deal of gallery work as well, but I would say our prime income really is from the art fairs," says Kaczmarczyk. "And we have a daughter in college, too. I'd like to say supported by art fairs, but she did get a hefty scholarship," she laughs.

But it's been a good living. Berta makes shiny replicas of vintage diners, some with glowing pink neon. Kaczmarczyk makes colorful teapots and other sculptures that feature brilliantly beaded collages and gold and silver luster. Both have a penchant for flowered island-print clothing, but they are yin and yang forces: Berta is the fast-talking wise guy; his wife is warm and gracious. He calls her a saint for putting up with him.

Art fair life has its rewards for the family. Kaczmarczyk thinks her kids have acquired great people skills from the fairs. "They've talked to a lot of different people. Not only artists, but people of all ages, customers, people from differ-

ent backgrounds. I think they start feeling more comfortable and have more exposure than kids would normally have at that age."

But Zack, a high school senior who is majoring in math and looking at Princeton in the fall, says there's another element. "I think it's always fun to have artists as parents because it's a much more exciting life than having a dad who goes off 9 to 5 and comes home and wears a tie everyday. It's kind of fun because all my friends like my parents because they're cool." Berta, clad in red high-topped sneakers, shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, nods. "Goofy," he says.

Fun factors into the traveling element as well. Last summer was the first time Zack was at the Suttons Bay fair, and in the



Jerry Berta and Madeline Kaczmarczyk



Cents and Sensibility: The Cost of Life on the Road

On a good weekend with the right stuff, art fair vendors can pull in \$5,000 to \$20,000. But costs eat into profits, and the physical labor—wrapping, packing, unpacking, schlepping, setting up, then sitting all day in a tent—takes its toll. Repetitive-strain injuries run rampant, hand and wrist braces are common gear, and back and feet problems plague even the youngest artisans. Rustic furniture maker Bill Perkins of Suttons Bay, a 17-year veteran of the art fair circuit, lists some of the escalating costs:

- Professional slides of work for juried shows: \$500–\$1,000
- Tent: \$250–\$1,200 for a zip-up model
- Display panels: \$500–\$800
- Display cases: \$200 plus
- Rental of a 10-x-10-foot booth: \$100–125 in Northern Michigan, \$250–450 in Detroit or Chicago
- Hotel fees, food, gas

But Perkins, a full-time artist whose work ranges from \$55 for a set of bookends to \$1,600 for a settee, points to the obvious upside of it all: “People take home a piece of you.” A reward beyond measure.

overwhelming heat that settled in those early August days, he was delighted to be able to jump into the water when the weather was too much.

“This is actually one of the prettiest settings—this and Charlevoix—for art fairs,” says Berta, who does 15 a year. His wife shows her works at a dozen. But this winter, when they take their show on the road, it will be without their kids. Kaczmarczyk says they used to join them for the winter shows in warmer climes, but now they have too many extracurricular activities at school. It’s a big change, but all a part of the journey for an arts family—a trip that has been worth the twists and turns in the road. *Berta and Kaczmarczyk are based in Rockford, MI. 616-866-1950*



Steven Olszewski

Steven Olszewski

Steven Olszewski’s unglazed, raku-fired figurative sculptures are otherworldly—dark and heavily textured with diminutive heads. “I have heard the word ‘Beetlejuice’ 50 million times in the last couple years, and I’ve never seen the movie, either,” the 21-year art fair veteran says dryly. In any case, his statues evoke strong reactions from passersby—just what Olszewski wants.

People either love them or despise them. Olszewski smiles about that part, and when pressed will admit he kind of enjoys it when people don’t like his work. Sometimes, when he is out of sight behind the booth or in the shade, people will voice their opinions—loudly. “They’ll say ‘Ooh, I hate this.’ But that’s when my ears perk up,” he says. “Most people want to be polite and say, ‘Oh, I like it,’ whether they do or not. But when people don’t like it, it’s really interesting to hear what they don’t like.”

He says some are agitated by his figures with elongated forms and small heads. “I like that,” Olszewski says, sitting passively on a stool next to his tent. “It reminds me of Henry Moore’s sculptures, and it makes them seem more spiritual, like the spirit is really separated from the body—that’s my idea.”

A few years ago, his tall sculptures were even darker and more unsettling.

“They reminded people of concentration camp victims or dead people, because they were more stark and gaunt and their faces weren’t as cheerful,” Olszewski explains. But he was having a hard time making their faces look more serene and peaceful—a hard effect to accomplish when working on such a small scale. “They’re only about an inch tall, these faces, so to get that mouth just right so it has that look of serenity and peacefulness, it’s just the slightest upturn or slightest downturn makes every bit of difference.”

He sold all of them, anyway. “I sell everything sooner or later—almost everything. Some of them end up broken in the driveway,” he says wryly.

But art is funny, he says, because really a lot of it just comes from the subconscious. When Olszewski started making the figures, he was at a darker time in his life. “Now I’m happier, and the pieces reflect that. I guess I feel a little more at peace, more serene. And, too, part of it is what you’re trying to say. Sometimes it’s just a cathartic thing, and then other times, it has more to do with what you want to give to the world. These are more about what I want to give.”

Olszewski is based in Pinkney, MI. 734-878-6439

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Northern Michigan Art Fair Schedule

JUNE

29–July 20 Jordan River Arts Council Annual Invitational Art Exhibition, East Jordan 231-536-3385.

JULY

1–20 Jordan River Arts Council Annual Invitational Art Exhibition, East Jordan, 231-536-3385.

3–4 Arts & Crafts Show, Boyne City Veteran’s Park, 231-582-6222.

4 Art in the Park, Frankfort 231-352-7251.

6 Beulah Art Fair, Beulah, 231-325-6642.

6–7 Charlevoix Summer Art Show, 231-547-2101.

13 Elberta Arts & Crafts Show, 231-352-9504 or 231-352-7251.

13 Cheboygan Arts Festival, Cheboygan, 231-627-5841

or 231-625-8427 or www.theoperahouse.org.

20 Northport Creek Arts Encounter, Northport, 231-386-7019.

20 Art in the Park, Petoskey, 231-347-4150.

20 Elk Rapids Arts and Craft Show, 231-264-8202.

27 Traverse Bay Outdoor Art Fair, NMC Campus, 231-941-9488.

29 Sztuka! Festival of art, music and fine food, Legs Inn, Cross Village, 231-347-4337.

AUGUST

3–4 Bay Harbor Art Fair, Marina District, 972-394-5236.

3–4 Suttons Bay Art Festival, 271-6590.

3–4 Portside Art Fair, East Jordan. 231-536-3416.

10 Waterfront Art Fair, Charlevoix, 231-547-2101.

17 Frankfort Art Fair, 231-352-7251.

17 Heritage Park Council Arts & Crafts Fair, Irons, 231-266-8931.

17 Downtown Art Fair, Traverse City, 922-2050.

23–24 Mackinaw City Fine Arts & Crafts Show, 800-666-0160.

24 Elk Rapids Chamber Arts & Crafts Show, 231-264-8202.

31–Sept. 1 Arts & Crafts Dockside, St. Ignace, 800-338-6660.

NORTHERN TRAVELER TIP

Suttons Bay Art Festival

The Suttons Bay Art Festival is the first weekend of August and features a juried show and sale at the marina with 90-plus artists and a fine food tent. Hours: Saturday 10–6 and Sunday 10–5 with a pancake breakfast Sunday at 10 a.m. Call the Suttons Bay Chamber of Commerce at 231-271-5077 for