

## Interview printed in February 2006 issue of “The Artful Mind” By Edward Bride

If you think it's easy to categorize the work of Steve Rosenzweig, dream on. There are landscape painters, impressionists in oil, portraitists, sculptors, you name it. And then, there's Rosenzweig, who, you might say, fits neatly into the category of “all of the above.”

While it is easy to pigeonhole some artists, others totally defy any attempt to define them with one simple sentence. The style of this eclectic visual artist from Copake, NY, can be called by many names or labels, none very neatly accurate. So, how does he describe himself?

“This has been my life, and the idea of being hard to label, more specifically than just being a visual artist, may cause a little trouble when I'm trying to put myself out there, but that's the way I am, the way I've always been.” Even his mother would agree, he adds.

The multifaceted present-day work reflects his training and life experiences. He attended SUNY Purchase expecting his fine arts education to lead him to a career in graphic design. His father has a good friend who is a graphic designer, and the father of a high school friend had a graphic design agency. “So, it was all around me, and seemed like something I'd like to do, especially with the cartoony drawing style I had back then.”

The career potential of graphic design was obvious to him: “I was pretty good at it in high school, and had that in mind for a long time. As a teenager, I started to ask myself what I could do with art. I had no notion of becoming a painter, I didn't even know what that meant. It didn't seem interesting, didn't seem like a career, but graphic design gave me a reason to go to art school.”

While graphics design was in his past environment, a change in the environment quickly clarified for Rosenzweig that graphic design was not the future. “Soon after I got into art school, I changed all that. I decided that I wanted to paint.”

So, that was that.

Maybe.

In the beginning, Steve Rosenzweig figured he would go into advertising. But the epiphany occurred early...within a few weeks...“I just wasn't interested in it any more.” Fortunately, he didn't need to switch majors, because SUNY's fine arts department had “so many roads. In that first year, no matter what you were going to focus on later, you took a general visual arts curriculum. Sophomore year got a little more specific. But it's also a sort-of free-form curriculum.”

Instead of walking a narrow path, he has walked many. During those years, what work was memorable? Did it stay with him?

“Definitely. Especially my senior year. My senior project had a very specific subject matter. After 20 years of doing other things, like designing movie sets, I came back to serious visual arts, and picked up on those themes again. As if I'd never left, in a way.”

The senior thesis was about dreams, and the apocalypse. “In my junior year, I started having a series of dreams about floating. My first image from dreams is an etching of a floating character. That's me...flying. The dreams became increasingly apocalyptic, apocryphal, and sometimes they weren't so heavy, but that's what I had to work with.”

That floating man was part of a big installation that was the class project. The whole senior class took over a giant building on the Purchase campus, a gallery for the project. “I was able to claim a big room, a huge space. Using giant paintings, and a paper mache’ character of this guy, I filled my space so it was sort-of like walking into my dreams.”

The dream theme eventually went away, “I stopped having flying dreams, although when I returned to painting, they did return, somewhat. They must indicate a transitional period for me. As I was moving out of the movie business and coming back to painting, I did start to have some, but fewer, floating and flying dreams again.”

At SUNY, there was a big film department, the artist recalls. “And though I didn’t take film courses, I had friends who were in the film-making department.” As with so many aspects of higher education, the relationships would turn out to be significant, some years thence.

After college, and not knowing what he was going to do with his art background, Rosenzweig took various jobs for a few years, including doing pre-press work at the Village Voice.

“And then, I got pulled back into the art world by a friend who was working for the sculptor Red Grooms. This was amazing; there I was, in the art world, working as an assistant to Red Grooms!

“Red created so much stuff, he was so prolific, there was plenty to do. He would oversee two, three, even four people creating the wood sculptures, paper mache’, all over the studio. He would oversee it, but we had a lot of freedom. It was very exciting, taking direction from Red Grooms but having that kind of artistic freedom. It was collaborative.”

But it wasn’t providing a springboard for his own work, or helping him establish a career as a visual artist. “It got to a point that I wanted to create my own artwork, even though I learned so much from him and the others. Something that I took from that was working with materials, and being excited about new materials and techniques, utilizing all that information and exploring new ways of making stuff. We used all sorts of things, from weird paper, spray-on foam, painting, clay, etc.”

Then, the fortunate accident of timing. “I must have mumbled something about this not being fulfilling, not doing anything for my future. And my friends said ‘We’re making movies. What about being an art director, or production designer, something like that?’ I must have been vulnerable, because I jumped at the suggestion and didn’t even know what the job was.”

Rosenzweig weaned himself out of Red Grooms’ studio, and worked on some low-budget independent movies. “All of a sudden, I was in some strange, new space. It was completely freeing, totally creative, and I was loving it. And it made sense. It was visual, I got to make things, build things, see things in a different way than I had ever seen before.”

That was a transition from one form of 3-D to another, although now Rosenzweig was the one designing in 2-D (paper drawings of concepts that would be implemented in three dimensions). His work started with drawings, working out problems on paper first, and then translated into sets.

“I’d start with conversations with the director. I basically had limited resources to create a world for the characters and script to live in. It seemed to come naturally. I knew

how to collaborate in telling a story visually. While I knew what each day would entail, each was different. I had no idea where it was taking me. It was thrilling, exciting, and nerve-wracking.”

And award-winning, including Best Set Design at the 1992 Atlanta Film Festival for “My Birthday Cake,” and Best Art Direction at the 1996 New York Shows , for “The Red Shoe Diaries.”

There was lots of caffeine and cigarette smoking in those days, “but now I’m green tea and no smoking; I don’t need that stuff anymore.”

Credit his relocation to Columbia County for that change in stimulants. The geographic move announced another transition, from movies to painting. Motivation? “I got tired of the movie business, was feeling pretty lost and didn’t really know what I wanted to do. The pressure was on me to break more into Hollywood-style stuff; if I really wanted to be successful, I’d have to move out to Hollywood, and that was a daunting, horrible prospect for me. I wasn’t so much in love with the business, but I did love the work.”

This tension took its toll. “I guess I started to lose interest in the work, and in the idea that you need to be ‘on top’ in order to be considered successful in that business. This was not important to me. I was successful, and supported myself, and would travel a lot for work. But it just seemed that I wasn’t willing to step-up to the plate anymore, with what I would have to do to maintain that career.”

Now comes the part that’s familiar to many artists from this region. He purchased a place in Columbia County, NY. “Living up here quickly soured me even more on the movie business. Honestly, with all this beauty... as cliché as it sounds, it made the movie business feel even less fulfilling. This place quickly became my full-time residence, and I just had to start painting and drawing. “

Rosenzweig acknowledged that he had had several satisfying collaborative partners while in the movie business, “people I loved working with,” even when he could maintain control. “Others were so horrible that it just sucked the life out of me, made me feel like some sort of automaton, producing somebody else’s vision. And that wasn’t satisfying. And, the money wasn’t enough to keep me there.”

Working for someone else had not been a huge issue for him, “although I do love being an independent, creative person. I like to come up with my own ideas, good or bad but they are my ideas, and then come into the studio and work on them. There’s nobody looking over my shoulder, compromising my creativity, and no one that I had to collaborate with.”

So, painting, then.

The move to Columbia County inspired him to paint landscapes. “I hadn’t really done them before, it was the setting. I wanted to record and remember where I lived. It was a no-brainer. I needed something to get myself back into making art. I didn’t want to think about the subject so much as just doing it. And so I thought, ‘Of course, landscapes.’ That’s the obvious thing for me, it’s so easy to find beautiful places to paint.”

He admires regional Berkshires painters of the current day, and seemed particularly inspired by the work of JMW Turner. “This was how I wanted to start my new life as an artist.”

He paints almost entirely in the studio from photographs or memory, not *au pleine air*. Not that he paints the scene directly from a photo, but it's just a way to remember where he was. "It's pretty hard to find one of my paintings that looks like a photograph. I have a horrible memory, so the photos help in that regard."

As his paintings have become more abstract, less like Turner, for example, he still wanted to capture "the feeling of place, where I live, and the photographs provide that reference." A large commission currently on his easel reflects his current work and thinking, in this regard: an abstract, "landscapy" feeling, but from his own imagination. This current work in process received little direction: "Up, positive, light," as opposed to some of his darker work. That's the extent of the guidance he received.

Does he like commission work, which can simultaneously be the salve and the bane of some artists? "I love to push paint around, and as long as someone is not telling me exactly what to paint, or requiring me to do something that goes against everything that I'm interested in doing, I love to do this work."

How much guidance is too much? "I might not go as far as matching a green plaid couch, but I will take some general direction."

While he appreciates the ability to do that commission work without someone looking over his shoulder, "it would be a drag if they came in when I was finished and said, 'I hate this.'" So far, that hasn't happened to him, although one couple accepted a painting that he thought was only half-done. "The woman said she loved it, and I was about to explain where I was headed with it, and she said, 'No, don't do anything to it, unless it's something that I can't see. This is perfect.' That was kind of jarring, I didn't think I was finished with it. So, I could tweak it just a bit, and I was done." That's a weird, ambiguous place to be.

After a landscape show last summer, which was both fun and successful for the artist, he needed to take a break from it. Some friends took him to Santa Fe last Fall, and "it was amazingly beautiful. I soaked up the landscape, but instead of running home to paint the place, I wanted to go home and not paint the place. It was so beautiful, I don't know where I would have gone with it." So, he turned to the little constructions, from pieces that he had collected, "to cleanse my palette" from landscape painting.

There will be a show of this work, after producing many more pieces. "First and foremost, I'm doing this just to do it. I do have to make a living, after all." But right now, he's exercising the creative side of his brain, before the business side kicks in.

While there can be subconscious thoughts or dreams to inspire one's creativity, dreams from the other side of the brain may inspire a business plan. For example, one conscious dream is to have his own exhibit place, where he can work, and show his own art and other people's art in a cooperative sort of way. There's a building in Copake with giant doors, "where I could imagine having a local art show and party." Acknowledging that Copake is not a destination for art, like Great Barrington, for example, he says it might be great to have "a space where I do my own thing, and then open it up for one day to show other people's work, sell some work, too."

Showing in galleries is an important part of any artist's life. But having something like a cooperative, close to home, and getting his friends involved, and being part of the community, would take that to the next level for Steve Rosenzweig. "Art should be available to as many people as can be, whether it's in the big galleries or locally at a

social event. If you have a space that is like a co-op, you have access at the grass roots; there can be open parties where anyone can come; kids can come in with their parents and actually see the artists doing their work, I think they would do that. I could teach art there, too.”

That space be required soon, as he’s growing out of his current studio. “Today, it’s good; tomorrow, it’s good, but soon...it won’t be enough.” In his current studio, he cannot do anything larger than the current commission on his easel. “Like a snail, I grow into my space, and move on, and do more in the new space.”

Rosenzweig has conducted his fair share of one-person shows, and the timing of his next, 3-D hanging art show is a practical matter: when the work is ready. Does he conceive work according to a theme, and which will require collecting specific material, or produce work specifically for a show that has been scheduled, regardless of any thematic approach? The answer seems to be “yes.”

Citing a recent example of a showing [at the B&G Wine Shop in Hillsdale?], he said, “I was preparing to do the show before I had enough work. But I knew I wanted to do a landscape show, and had about half the pieces I would need for a consistent theme.” Further, he wanted to have about 50percent more material than the space would handle, so he could be selective with what he showed, not “just hanging filler space up.” From the point of having half the necessary work to having half too much, he finished with about three or four paintings a month, working “pretty intensely.” He was proud of much of that work, but wasn’t happy with all of it, rejecting some of it before it ever became part of the show.

What does an artist do with his own rejected material? Discard it? “I’m not really emotional about the work that I don’t accept. I might throw paint on it, or put it away for awhile, and come back to it. Sometimes I can rework it and bring it to something that I like, turning it into something totally different.” While that usually doesn’t happen, because “I’ve lost the feeling for it,” some of his favorite paintings have been created that way, where “the vestige of the old one, the seed of the idea, remains.” The viewer might not see much of it anymore, “not much of it remains,” it’s there in spirit, and somehow may contribute to either the viewer’s or the artist’s own appreciation of the work.

In recent months, he has exhibited regionally at The Art Store in Barrington, and some other paintings have been at The Frame Shop in Sheffield. For his own space, he’d like it to be at home in Copake, perhaps at a converted fire station with those huge doors.

For his next show of 3-D work, “I am just exploring it now, I don’t even know what some of these things are, yet. A lot of the material comes from junk stores and flea markets, and I know that someday they’ll wind up in a piece of work. I mentally catalog it, and think I know where I’m headed. But as often as not, they wind up as something totally different.”

He is trying to keep a specific visual thread now, to establish certain constants. “Somewhere in them, there should be memory and individual, specific thoughts, a sensation or feeling, an event, that each one triggers to me internally. Something specific that I can harken from my childhood, or recent past, that these things evoke to me.”

Do these thoughts inspire what the piece is, or are the thoughts simply on the artist’s mind when he is creating? “I don’t go into it saying ‘I want to explore this memory of my grandmother’s apartment in the Bronx.’ I start putting things together, and it takes me

somewhere; as I'm in it, I then push it. If I come up with a specific feeling, I'll push it, without realizing that I've got it, until it's done. Then, this takes me to another place."

Take, for example, a piece he calls "Construction #1," which he designed after the Santa Fe hiatus. A visitor comments that a handle and horizontal slats represent a doorway, yet another transition. Between the cracks in the slats are bronze-colored sharp-contoured shapes, rather like mountains.

Is this a representation of Santa Fe, symbolizing his next transition? "I didn't even think of the door thing. Maybe you've discovered what it is. There's a landscape vibe. I didn't think of a visual transition, but I wanted to have some landscape in it, so people would know it's the same artist." The Santa Fe colors? "I didn't even think about that, either. But it definitely has that Santa Fe feeling, and color. Maybe that's it. Yeah, I like that idea."

It's ironic that the work conveyed the place, geographical as well as psychological, to a viewer without conscious thought on the part of the artist. Conscious or not, what's on an artist's mind comes out in his/her work.

Which brings us back to dreams. A lot of things inspire this artist's work, visually. Out of the blue –or maybe out of the grey—he mentions the twin "creepy, dark, other-worldly filmmakers, the Brothers Quay." Very cinematic, they create other-world short films that might reasonably be compared to a manifestation of a dream. He owns a collection of their work, going back to college; their 10 films are available on Amazon.com. "My friends and I have a movie night every now and then, and we start it off with one of their short films."

***"What happens in the shadow, in the grey regions, also interests us – all that is elusive and fugitive, all that can be said in those beautiful half tones, or in whispers, in deep shade."*** The Brothers (Stephen and Timothy) Quay, as quoted in Artforum, 1996.

They are strange beings, with haunting work "that touches something within me. I don't know whether I incorporate that work into mine. But maybe because I like tinkering with miniatures, with old patinaed, greasy, flaky, dry stuff that they put into their movies and I like working with that kind of material, maybe their work finds its way into mine."

Where does he want to be in five years? "I'd still like to be making my own art, and not be so unbelievably worried about money. But, I knew what I was getting into when I started this," and, he's not exactly in an unusual situation.

"This has been a transition in my life that I've always wanted to do, but was always afraid of doing it. It's the perfect thing for me. I'm much more relaxed than I used to be, and much more focused than I used to be. Mainly because of what the movie business did to me. It's not bitterness, that's just the way it was. And, some of the things that used to bother me don't bother me anymore. So, frankly, the whole poor-as-a-bird artist thing...I can live with that. I can succumb to that. Not that I like it, but I'm OK with it."

He could never do this kind of work in New York. "I need to come here every day. I need to wake up and worry about how this piece is going to come out. My brain is not so compartmentalized that I could do this if I were still in New York and doing something else. The distractions here are far fewer, and whatever distractions I have, I love."

Sounds like a dream with a happy ending.

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