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Matt Sesow interview with Hill Rag Magazine

by Jim Magner
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ART ON CAPITOL HILL AND BEYOND...

BY JIM MAGNI



MATT SESOW AND DANA ELLYN



"FISHNIPS" BY DANA ELL

ARTIST PROFILES:

MATT SESOW AND DANA ELLYN

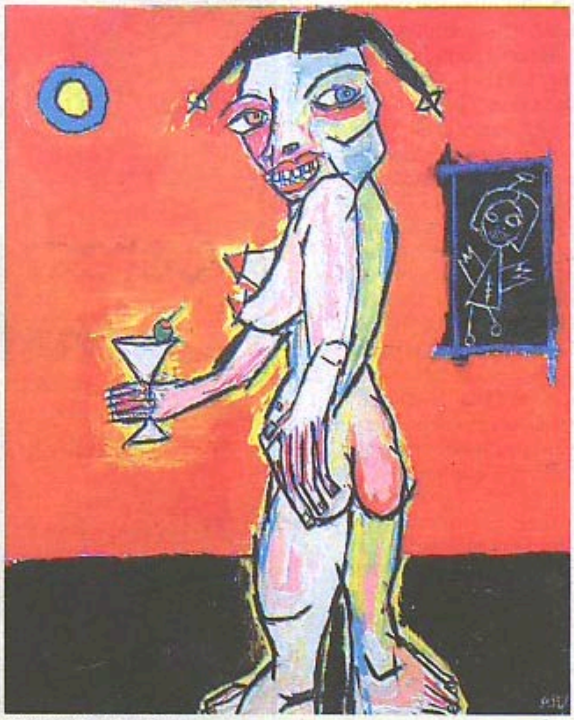
Love Hurts. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it pulls you out of a deep purple funk and makes anguish fun again. That's what happened to Matt Sesow: Dana Ellyn. They met at an art show in '01 and clicked It was the right place and time. Together their art is beginning to take off, but here's the interesting part... since becoming a couple, their individual identities as artists are actually becoming stronger.

"Love Hurts," was the name of their first two-person show. It was one-nighter at Studio 18, in mid-February. Their next art date is a longer one, called "Downtown Girl, Uptown Boy." It will be in the Martin Luther King Library on G Street (2nd floor). The reception is March 3 and the show runs through the month. Then it's Ohio and a show entitled, "Learning to Crawl."

Both artists use themes almost exclusively as a departure stage for blastoff. A subject line like "31 days in July" is consumed with a savage and joyous energy. Matt Sesow and Dana Ellyn drive ideas like nails through current events. Whatever the theme, they manage to steer clear of illustration and drill their way to the inner core of fearless, almost reckless, interpretation.

With Matt, a lot of personal frustrations are injected into the picture with the use of line, color and symbols. You can still hear the savage screams.

It's the same with Dana. Her recent work is breaking through an



"GUARDIAN" BY MATT SESOW

inbred reluctance to touch risky topics. She is peeling away the art school compulsion to make, and hide behind, pretty pictures. "I don't paint safe anymore."

Matt was born in Nebraska. When he was 8 years old, he ran across the small town airfield and into the path of an airplane. He lost part of his left arm, but survived. As a young adult, he "went into computers." After a tour with the Peace Corps in 88-89, he went back to his high tech work with IBM.

He started painting in 1993. His art began raw and angry and bit ragged holes through the paper with monster teeth and blistering eyeballs. Through painting, he released the trauma but didn't kill it. For a while, things were getting very dark. He says the disability is not the center of his art, but "I would probably not be painting without the accident."

Matt's work still bites big holes in the canvas and the sanctified social order of the day. Only now there is a greater confidence, with a higher level of sophistication in color and composition. One of his major works, " Collateral Damage," (8x 9 ft) is about Iraq. It will be the backdrop to 10 short plays based on the painting that will be performed in Phoenix in April.

Dana came at art from the opposite direction. She grew up in a little town in Connecticut. Always drawing—quiet—had support from parents—the ideal childhood. She started collage at 16 and majored in art. One of her first jobs was at the Holocaust Museum.

From there she got a job at a law firm as a computer trainer and began teaching art to law students at night. The class is about therapy as much as anything else. Now it is her basic income, which allows her to paint full time.

To Matt and Dana, the joy is in the work—10 hours a day, every day: painting, maintaining the web sites...contacting galleries. It's more passion than profession. They are bringing their obsession to everyone, at all price ranges, so step into pure passion—go see them at the MLK Library.

For more see, www.sasow.com, or www.danaellyn.com.

Jim Magner's Thoughts on Art

My interviews with Matt Sesow and Dana Ellyn, and my review of the film, "In the Realm of the Unreal," dropped me in the middle of outsider art. The term "outsider" refers to someone without formal art school training-- similar to Folk or Naïve art. But the genre has evolved in recent times; the term now brings up visions of anguished, anti-social subcultures—brilliant lost souls creating art in abandoned row houses with no concern for fame or money, the kind with bizarre tattoos and body piercings.

Henry Darger (See "Review") is often called an outsider artist and, in at least some ways, seems to fit in. Matt Sesow has insider outsider credentials, but says, "I'm not an outsider painter, I'm

a painter." Dana Ellyn paints in the "spirit" of outsider art, but can't be one because she has an art degree.

In truth, "Outsider" has taken on a capital O and has gone mainstream: websites, galleries, agents, magazines...the whole shootin' match. "Self-taught" is the banner—it's a matter of pride.

Outsiders, of course, learn by looking at other artists—we all do. Every art school graduate still has plenty to self-teach. Still, categories can be useful...and limiting. Useful in that it encourages people to make art that shouts about life and the way things are not always fair. It doesn't matter that they haven't been to art school to get the basics; it's Expressionism without the craft.

But being self-taught has no higher moral value than taking classes and it can become an anchor for artists afraid to take a drawing class for fear of being booted from the unskilled brotherhood.

I wonder what Henry Darger would say. Probably nothing.

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