DC Luxury

Sesow in DC Luxury Magazine 2009

Matt Sesow was interviewed in 2009 by writer Brendan Smith for DC Luxury Magazine. This article appeared in their July/August 2009 edition. It centered around Matt's annual "31 days in July Project" ... click a picture to enlarge

See the "31 Days in July Series" at http://31days.sesow.com
photos by Patrick King



THE RADAR | ART

Breaking News

Throughout July, local artist Matt Sesow deconstructs the front page and confronts his own rage

| By Brendan L. Smith | Photography by Patrick King |

A slew of children playing near a makeshift runway in a field in Lincoln, Nebraska, scatter as a small plane drops from the sky, its propeller blades blurring together. Eight-year-old Matt Sesow doesn't notice the plane landing behind him. Somehow the pilot doesn't notice him, either.

"It landed right on me, and it cut my arm up here," says the painter 35 years later, pointing to his left arm between his shoulder and elbow, toward the smooth stump where his arm suddenly ends. "All of the kids saw it, which was pretty hard-core for them. I don't remember it."

After competing in the Disabled Children's Olympics, winning a Mensa scholarship and reigning as University of Tulsa's homecoming king, Sesow moved to DC to an IBM software engineer. He joined a "group paint" one night in a half-hearted attempt to impress a woman who would become his wife, and later his ex-wife. The group left and he was still painting. The pieces were red and black and edgy, filled with amputees and anger. Unpacking nearly 20 years of emotion helped him confront his childhood trauma and led him away from an artless life of cubicles.

Sesow quit his job, sold most of his IBM stock and bought a tiny condominium in Adams Morgan. He ripped out the oven and dishwasher and now sleeps in a small loft to make room for his paintings, which he produces at a feverish pace. His raw, self-taught style—which draws comparisons to Francis Bacon, de Kooning and Basquiat—features bulbous headed figures with bulging eyes, jagged teeth, and severed limbs that float freely on the canvas. He transforms cute bunnies and cuddly panda bears into toothy beasts. Yet beneath their freakish exterior lies a vulnerability and a sly sense of humor, a twisting of society's demands that beauty equals perfection and ugliness guarantees rejection.

In 2003, Sesow began his *31 Days in July* series as a challenge to his girlfriend, fellow DC artist Dana Ellyn. For every day in July, they each created a new painting based on a story on the front page of *The Washington Post*. They had until the end of the month to finish 31 paintings. Ellyn did her series in March this year after the couple realized the intense day-to-day competition wasn't a good for their otherwise healthy relationship. "It's a test of any painter's ability to focus and set a goal and achieve it," Sesow says.

Sesow has sold nearly all of the 155 paintings he created during five years of the series. He ditched his manager eight years ago and avoids traditional representation, selling most of his paintings for less than $1,000 through his website and Facebook page. But he does show in galleries, including a solo show in Barcelona this past May.

Sesow, who calls himself a socialist, says, "It was almost too easy to paint stuff on the Iraq war and Bush." But even though he voted for Barack Obama, the new president isn't off the hook in the series this July. "I'll go after Obama," he says. "It's going to be hard for him to keep every promise. I'll definitely poke at any holes in the armor."

Sesow's paintings have featured wide-ranging topics in the news, including drug-tainted fish from China, CIA interrogation methods and the never-ending panda-pregnancy watch at the National Zoo. "It's really cool to see the reactions I get from people," he says. "People like the stories behind the paintings, and I'm very willing to talk about it. I'll tell people what a painting means to me." ■

Matt Sesow will display his "31 Days in July" paintings starting July 1 on sesow.com.

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IN THE PAINT Matt Sesow traded IBM assimilation for a few mosh frames.

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