

Meet the Artist Interview with Leo Bird; Artist and Motivational Speaker

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Art Journey and Confidence

When I first used drawings for a story in a stand-up comedy competition, an audience member told me, “You’ve got a sign! I’ll vote for you!” When I figured out that I needed to use a laser pointer to refer to drawings and the drawings needed to be exactly what I was talking about, the comedian after me asked the host to use the chalk board for a drawing. My high acceptance rate of displaying art in art galleries further boosted my confidence, especially when my drawing “Where’s My Buddy?” won several awards. Selling prints of my art at art fairs boosted my confidence, too.

Early Art

My drawing of a high schooler who won a scholarship to college and my self-portrait was a turning point in my art style. I made those drawings because I wanted to try the trick from Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain where you draw a photo while it is turned upside-down. When finished, I noticed these drawings were significantly more realistic than the drawings I made previously.

Combining Art and Motivational Speaking

The storytelling aspect of my art I came up with through trial and error. First, I write a text only story and examine parts of it that I think would benefit from a drawing. Then, I combine and alter photo references to create the image I want. I color to create the maximum amount of contrast, to make each detail stand out, using the minimum amount of color, to make the image less intimidating to look at.

Inspirations

I draw and write to communicate the way I feel, not because I am a fan of any artist. But fellow artists say I draw like Alex Katz, whose drawing Ada’s Garden is displayed at the Des Moines Art Center. A Demetri Martin story inspired me to use drawings as a background for ventriloquism. He is a famous stand-up comedian who uses drawings.

A Variety of Mediums

I primarily focus on Staedtler markers on a drawing pad. But when my Momentum art program had an art call for an immersive art exhibit, that inspired me to adapt my drawing “Where’s My Buddy?” into one, where instead of looking at a drawing, guests of Mainframe Studios would

walk in a cafeteria filled with wood figures inspired by that drawing. Julia Franklin and her husband helped me carve the wood figures, and Jill Wells helped me paint the wood figures. The friendly wood figure won third place at the Iowa State Fair.

Due to the success of the Converse High Tops drawing in art exhibitions and selling stickers of them at art fairs, I bought real white Converse High Tops and used fabric markers to make a design inspired by the drawing. I decided to simplify the design of the shoes due to space. I used neon markers, which I like.

Advice for Other Artists

People may be skeptical of your practice, but do not let that discourage you. When I spoke to Students with Exceptionalities (a class partially about autism), a classmate scolded the first paragraph, saying, "Maybe we should include you at lunch!" Eight years later, a drawing inspired by that paragraph won honorable mention twice and first place once. Another person did not like the direction I was going with my project, but I continued onward, and I now have four years of art exhibit experience.

Not every art gallery will accept you either, but do not let that discourage you. I have been rejected by art galleries but have been able to get quotes of recommendation from them and network with the curators. Even celebrities have been rejected by employers.

Keep an open mind to the direction your project will go. Before writing *The Words He Cannot Say*, I used to think my challenges fitting in were autism related. But after sharing my stories, I learned people without autism face the same challenges I do. So when creating my immersive art exhibit, I focused on describing how I felt instead of trying to get a certain reaction from the audience.

Keep an open mind to the suggestions people have for you, as they notice things you will not, and do not get too attached to an idea.

Choosing Art for Hedberg Public Library

I decided to display the drawings of mine that were the largest and would make sense standing alone. My other drawings are smaller, meant for a small portion of my story, and I think would not be as fun standing alone.

I'm excited for this exhibit! I love sharing my stories with people. People interpret my stories differently based on their experiences, and I learn from the audience too.

Visit Leo's website at: <https://leobirdstandsup.com/about-leo-bird/>