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Spokane Arts and Culture

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SPOKE(a)N(e)

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I'm finding it quite difficult to write an editor's letter this month. That has been the theme of the month for me. I am, as my friend Eric put it, "suffering from writer's constipation".

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I do want to say that I am extremely grateful to Alyx Franz for taking up the challenge to write up her thoughts on Kinetic and Terrain. I was not able to attend either. Also, a big thank you to Eric Strate for being our Artist Profile this month. I'm hoping that spending some time soaking in the words and images of the artist community around me will get the gears working again.

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## Spokane's Art Scene Dropped the Atom Bomb

*by Alyx Franz*

On October 1, 2010, our city's Fall Visual Arts Tour kicked off with a positively tumultuous creative bang. Among the handful of participating exhibits were two I definitely won't forget: the third-annual Terrain and the Riverspeak Collective's Kinetic.

The first thing on my mind that night was finding the Lorinda Knight Gallery. As I walked through our downtown, originally set on an evening of Terrain, I came across this enormous sculpture of a fish—seemingly made of recycled newspaper, chicken wire, etcetera—hanging in the window of a gallery I had never before entered. I had found Kinetic, the "motion-oriented, multimedia

exhibit!" Upon entering, I immediately noticed three things: there was a wicked-sweet Atari hooked up in the corner, there were bubbles (!!) everywhere, and our humongous drop cloth from the Youth Sustainability Council's Sustainable Uprising event was on the wall! Brilliant! There was also a tie-dyed protest dummy slouched beneath a spew of electric pink grenades—what in the world?!

There was also live acoustic music at the time, thanks to a lovely Mister Adam Kugler, as well as a table full of hand-bound 'zines available for purchase.

There were quite a few people circuiting through when I was there, which explains the fantastic \$286 we raised from the exhibit to help the Riverspeak Collective put on even more phenomenal events next year. I am not surprised, though. The energy that Kinetic put out proved to be magnetic, a grand success at meeting the theme of the night, to celebrate the energy of our local art scene. The whole show was quite eclectic, very bubbly (literally!), and hugely interactive. I wouldn't change a thing about it, and I would certainly like to see something like it here again.



After that delightfully different approach to an art exhibit, I easily found the Music City Building—all I had to do was follow the line of tobacco-reeking hipsters to the front doors. After passing the large crowd, I immediately found myself engulfed in an intense artistic experience.

To my right was live music, from steel-guitar-armed Silver Treason, to the younger ghost-rock-ridden Jazz, to our headlining homeboy James Pants. To my left was floor-to-ceiling—mind you, there are two floors—of visual art: acrylic, watercolor, and photography. You name it, it was at Terrain. Moving on a bit, I found myself overwhelmed with options: the glass room of balloon parrots; the stairs leading up to MORE art and alcoholic beverages (the favorite of the night, for sure), the hall that was added this year for the sake of the humongous number of contributing artists, as well as a room made purely to blow your mind. It contained a couple of rows of foldout chairs and a wall of projected psychedelic patterns.

There was so much for attendees to do: the aforementioned pinball, mind-blowing drinking, (PLUS!) grooving, social networking, simply admiring the art, contributing to the murals on the paper-cardboard-covered walls, and/or writing their bit in the box of sorrows. It was all free, although we were quite mobbed at the door for donations. I believe the donations were well-deserved, though. I most definitely would like to see Terrain carried out again next year, with the same beautiful diversity of exhibits, all-around supportive energy for our local arts scene, and 150 percent attendance! Man, was it SO packed!

I would, however, like to see just a tad less of the partying hipsters and more of a collaborative and energetic appreciation for the arts. I don't want this to turn into a dull museum-like fundraising, social-networking event, mind you (that's what the Artist Reception is for), but I think we can find a good balance for next year. That way, attendees don't have to pull out the earplugs, and we can bring more of the vital young artists in the area to mesh with Spokane's art establishment, without drowning them in cigarette smoke and drunken art snobs. All in all, the energy of the night put out by these two amazing shows truly shattered any preconceived notion of Spokane's Visual Arts Tour consisting solely of the same-ole-same-ole First Friday findings. They added some tremendous excitement for the upcoming year's creative potential.

Photos by Brooke Matson

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*Photo by Rachel Strate*

I'm very excited to share this with you. Eric Strate has created some work that is, in a word, astonishing. Creating photographs with a painterly style, he shows that photography can be a media of fine art. I am going to step aside and let the artist introduce you to his work. Enjoy!



*SPOKEN: Basic background stuff.*

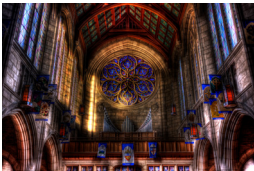
ERIC: Grew up in Spokane, went to Mead High School. Did my undergraduate work in biology and chemistry at Whitworth College, where all along I planned to either go on to be an M.D. or a Ph.D. in something science-related. After college, I got a fellowship from the National Institutes of Health that paid for me to go through a Ph.D. program in molecular biology, with a biotechnology emphasis, at WSU. Spent some time there doing breast cancer research. I gave mice cancer and then killed them to study the tumors—sad stuff, but for the greater good. To this day, I can't kill a mouse with a mousetrap, I can't fish; I have a hard enough time killing bugs because I feel bad about it. I finished most of the coursework for my Ph.D., but realized that, while I loved science, the life of a researcher just wasn't for me. I was a people person; I wanted to share my knowledge with people. So, I left WSU and headed back to Spokane.

Upon my return, I did a two-year stint at EWU teaching basic computer classes like Web programming while working towards a master's in computer science. I wasn't really sure what I was going to do with this degree, but I really did love the teaching part of the deal, so, after those two years I quit, again, and headed back to Whitworth College to get a master's in teaching. I had decided what I was going to do, teach high school science. For the last seven years I've been teaching science at Lewis and Clark High School.



**SPOKEN:** *What inspires you artistically?*

**ERIC:** Throughout all of my life, I've always appreciated art, with specific interests in drawing, dramatic paintings (I loved the work of Rembrandt and the other Dutch Golden Age painters the most), and photography. But aside from a brief dream of being a cartoonist in the third grade, I never really pursued my artistic interests beyond doing some sketches or figure drawings now and then.



I really like "dramatic" art, stuff that has a larger-than-life feel to it, or that just conveys powerful emotion through either the subject matter or the particular style—colors, contrast, saturation, etcetera. I think this is what initially got me interested in HDR. It felt like you could create an image that made it feel like you were looking at something you'd seen before for the first time—with a whole new feel to it. The vibrant tones, the saturated colors...the images just seemed to "pop."

On the other end of the spectrum, I also draw a lot of inspiration from photography that has a photojournalistic feel to it. Photographers who can create works of art by capturing everyday occurrences inspire me to want to grab my camera and start shooting more than anything. Some of the older ones whose work I never get bored of looking at are Alfred Eisenstaedt, Dorothy Lange, and Garry Winogrand, to name just a few. A long time ago, I read a quote by Winogrand that still drives me to get better today, "All things are photographable." Simple, but true—and a source of endless inspiration and frustration. We've all seen pictures of very common objects that catch our eye and hold our interest. The lighting, the shapes, the overall composition can turn the everyday into the extraordinary. I think for all photographers, the real challenge behind what we do is making whatever it is we are pointing our cameras at truly photographable.

As far as current inspiration goes—I'm really working on my wedding photography, so guys like Jeff Ascough and Ryan Brenizer are two big sources, as well as Matt Shumate, a local photographer whom I've been fortunate enough to second shoot with on several occasions and whose work is, in my opinion, on par with just about anybody known at the national level. They've all got their own unique styles, and in studying theirs, I am really working on developing my own. I also really like the work of Vincent Versace—I know some photographers who aren't inclined to use Photoshop as much as he does—but, again, I am a big fan of the powerful, dramatic images he creates.

I know that many people in the world of photography really don't care for HDR—and I agree there is a lot of it out there that is overdone or just forced onto an image where it really doesn't work—but, I think if done well, and in "moderation," so to speak, it can produce some very powerful images. I actually do a lot less of it now than I used to, not because I don't like it, but because I have been too busy with more traditional stuff to focus on it. Regardless, I know there are those who think of HDR as nothing more than a gimmick that cheapens the overall practice of photography. I don't see it that way. I've sold several HDR prints to people who loved the overall look of the images; they couldn't have cared less how these images were produced. Sometimes I think we can forget this simple fact. While there is something to be said for getting that magical image one hundred percent in camera, it's the image itself, not the process by which that image was created, that is going to draw most viewers in.

*SPOKEN: How long have you been doing photography?*

ERIC: Been taking pictures for about ten years, but I really didn't get into photography until about three years ago when I got my first DSLR. Got into photography after a neck injury and subsequent surgery required me to leave behind the two things I spent most of my free time doing, golfing and working out; I was a bit fanatical about each. I needed something I could really "dive into" and, after looking at the work of some friends who pursued photography as a hobby, I realized it was the perfect opportunity to find a new passion.

Started with a lot of wildlife photography, mainly osprey and eagles and some of the squirrels that liked to hang out in my front yard, and would once in awhile try to sneak into the house when the front door was open, as well as shots of my nephews. Within a year of hobby work, I realized that this wasn't just something I wanted to do for a hobby; photography was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Did some extensive research on everything from lighting to equipment, met some local photographers through the INPA. Jon Martinez was the first photographer from the INPA I met. He helped me immensely when I was getting started by guiding me on some equipment purchases. From there, it's just been a blur of sorts: taught myself HDR, worked with Matt Shumate to learn the ins and outs of wedding photography and building a portfolio, started shooting seniors, more weddings, family shots, etcetera. My business is really starting to pick up, and it's my hope that, while I love teaching, I'll be able to one day make my living behind the camera, or maybe make half my living behind the camera and the other half in front of the classroom. I don't know that I could ever fully give up working with students. Luckily, my wife of six years, Rachel, has been extremely supportive of my dream to get a successful photography business going. She's awesome and really is the glue that holds the entire operation together.

*SPOKEN: I want to take a look at your High Dynamic Range (HDR) work. What initially drew you to working with HDR? How long does it take you to process one of those images from start to finish?*

ERIC: My initial draw was described above: the vibrant colors, the larger than life feel, the way it made everyday scenes look dramatic. When I am creating an HDR image, I almost feel like a kid on Christmas morning. As I'm taking the multiple exposures of the scene, I'm already visualizing what the final product is going to look like in my head—like the kid who is picturing the new GI Joe with the Kung Fu grip wrapped up under the tree. Processing the files through Photomatix, and waiting for the initial image to show up on the screen, is akin to opening the present; sometimes you get that GI Joe with the Kung Fu grip, other times you get tighty whities. The problem I see with HDR today is that too many people are trying to make the tighty whities into the GI Joe...if that makes metaphorical sense. In simpler terms, they are trying to take an image that just doesn't work as HDR and force the style onto it because they are under the mistaken impression that anything looks good in HDR.



A single HDR image can take me anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes, to three to four hours to finish, depending on the level of complexity. The basic process simply involves taking multiple exposures of an image, some which contain details in the shadows, others which contain details in the highlights, and then basically combining them into a single image using software like Photomatix.

But this is just the start. The process can be used to generate images that have a very natural look or images that have a more surreal look. There are several different settings and adjustments you can make—it takes some time to learn



how to make use all of these options to get to the image you have envisioned.

Most of my HDR shots are made from three to seven exposures. But that is just the start; I'll often create anywhere from two to five different HDR files from those same exposures, each with different settings. For example, for an image including a waterfall, some buildings, and a sunset, I would create one version that accentuated the textures and details in the waterfall and water/rocks below it...but this will create a noisy looking sky, so I'll create another version with a smoother sky (and subsequently a smoother waterfall), etcetera. I'll continue with this process until I have a version of the image with each individual element looking the way I want it to look. From here it is on to Photoshop to create the final image by layering the intermediate HDR files. I use layer masks extensively in Photoshop to selectively blend in the components from each image that I want in the final product. Once I finish this step, it's just a matter of the rest of the Photoshop adjustments: dodging, burning, maybe a little localized use of the high pass filter with a soft or vivid light blending mode—again, I use layer masks to selectively apply effects. The hardest part can be deciding when the picture is actually "done." The most popular HDR shot I've done to this point is the shot of St. John's Cathedral. This particular image was a seven-exposure HDR composed of about five different intermediate HDR files and then extensively processed in Photoshop to achieve the tones I wanted.

*SPOKEN: What has been your favorite part of the Spokane art community?*

ERIC: Well, thus far I've really only interacted directly with some of the local photographers. Everyone I've met has been very supportive—which is a great thing because it helps everyone get better, which only improves the quality of the work coming out of Spokane. Although I haven't met many local artists, my wife and I have taken the time to check out a lot of their work, as well as the work of the local and non-local artists on display at the MAC, the Tinman, Avenue West, Pottery Place, etcetera. We've really enjoyed the art shows at the parks; can't recall the name of the one in Browne's Addition at the moment...Art in the Park? The point is that we've enjoyed how accessible art is to the public in general here in Spokane: diverse selection of galleries, organized events...just a great overall "feel" for art in Spokane.

*SPOKEN: Anything you would like to say to the Spokane art community?*

ERIC: What would I like to say to the Spoken art community? Thanks for having created such a diverse and supportive atmosphere for all types of art here in Spokane. I'm a newcomer to all of this, but the foundation they have already laid seems to have helped foster a very positive community-wide attitude towards art, and this helps everyone. I'm anxious to become a more active member of this community.



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