



20th Anniversary Story #4

A Word or Two About Jeff Zimpel

by Lynn Cohen

If you ever wondered what is happening on the underside of a brushstroke (and who hasn't?), you need go no further than Jeff Zimpel's show, "The Ecology of Marks" at Arts at Large, where he is Artist-in-Residence from Jan 21-March 31. There, you can stand before a series of enlarged bits of paint so improbably saturated with color, you may need to remind yourself to breathe. To experience these photographs is to encounter--even disappear into--other worlds. It is a virtual submergence into invisible realms of existence--magnified multitudes of texture and color that seize your senses, realign your cells, excite your nerve endings.

The show includes some of Zimpel's earlier work, and reflects his evolution from a Cardinal Stritch University student on a baseball scholarship, where he studied graphic design, to high school and college art teacher, to painter, to photographer, philosopher-pigmentologist-artist-educator.

"In the other room I have some older paintings...it looks like a different person made those. I love having trails of my work. I can look...at it...and think, 'I'm happy I shed that skin,' but that was the best representation of myself at that time. And these photographs are the best representation of myself now."

The show, in the bright and inviting Arts at Large gallery space, will ultimately include twenty-three local artists whose contributions exemplify Zimpel's ideal world vision.

"To get an artist residency in the city of Milwaukee is a big deal. There aren't very many, and even fewer with a budget. I kept thinking of all these people I wanted to work with. What is that French expression 'I is we?' So I thought, let's fracture the budget into a million pieces. I am only as good as all my artist friends. This spirit of collaboration and celebrating one another...that's kind of the character of this show that I wanted to put in this space so other people might do their own version of that in the future. I wanted to invite them all in to create a mini version of what the world could be."



The twenty-three commissioned artists whom Zimpel has invited include a vegan chef, poets/writers, dancers, musicians, and visual artists. The pandemic, put the show's opening online, but the gallery is open daily (hours?) to the public, and will throw open its doors on March 31, 5:00-9:00, for a closing celebration and feast that, in addition to the exhibited art, will feature all the show's non-visual "mark makers."

Zimpel grew up in Green Bay, WI, a goal kick away from City Stadium, now Lambeau Field. Zimpel's provocative relationship with color began early. As a boy, Zimpel preferred the blue and orange uniform colors of the Chicago Bears to Green Bay's green and gold. "In elementary school, I got sent home for wearing the Bears shirt on Packer's Day," he said. And while he didn't necessarily recognize it then, color would become the force that would most distinguish him and his art.

"My imagination felt so tangible," he says, reflecting on his younger years. Images would come to his mind insistently, vividly. "I read 'The Life of Frederick Douglas' in fifth grade, and I had so many ideas about what things looked like, and an impulse to do something with them, but had no real outlet for it." While his parents encouraged creativity of all kinds, art had a more functional role in his social and cultural environment; the commercial application of artistic skill had a higher value than 'art for art's sake.'

Zimpel played baseball through middle and high school and became an accomplished pitcher. He was awarded a baseball scholarship to Cardinal Stritch University, where he majored in graphic design. "I had the first version of Photoshop," he recalls. "I did posters and the like. It was a way of doing art in a commercially acceptable way."

Through college, Zimpel took art classes, but got lost in philosophy, particularly Nietzsche's idea that art's creation depends on the battling tension between the opposing structural/formal Apollonian and the self-forgetting, passion-driven Dionysian forces. "Most of school was Apollonian," Zimpel says. "The Dionysian was what appealed to me."

He took "The Philosophy of Art," taught by Dr. John Perry, who "synced philosophical impulses with visual images." Dr. Perry gave Zimpel The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh. "The moment I finished that book, I told myself I was going to start painting. I didn't know how. But I had an intense daydream, a persistent image of an older woman in a back corner of a café. I just knew I had to paint her. So I went and bought a framed painting from a thrift store, and got some oil paints, primed over the old artwork and started drawing the person in my mind's eye."



Zimpel continued painting while he worked towards his Masters in Education and teaching licensure at Cardinal Stritch. He took evening classes and spent all day in his studio, where he solidified relationships with other art students, several of whom are included in “The Ecology of Marks” exhibition.

“I found the language for visual art later than normal. The big shift happened when I discovered that art could be a vehicle for questioning the received world.”

After graduating from Cardinal Stritch, Zimpel taught graphic design at the high school and college level. “I thought graphic design could be used as a way of thinking, versus simply packaging ideas.” Some of his high school students were especially gifted artists. After curating and accompanying them on a summer art tour of France and Spain, Zimpel felt wistful about the ones going on to college to study art. “I wanted to do what they were doing.”

At 36, Zimpel is vibrant, handsome and youthful, with dark, deep-set eyes that widen when animated by conversation. Through generally soft-spoken, he exudes urgent enthusiasm for art’s transformative power, and for his approach to bringing out the artist in everyone.

The show’s title, “Ecology of Marks” may sound bit conceptual; this harkens to Zimpel’s academic experience in UWM’s MFA program of “Arts and Social Engagement.” His investigation into what it meant to be in a program (so named), led him to consider all the forces and influences that culminate in a work of art. “Ecology refers to the connections between art and all the forces that give rise to it,” he explains.

“Marks came about this way. At UWM I was immersed in paint, investigating different strategies around painting. And one day this question grabbed me: ‘What is going on, on the underside of a brushstroke?’”

To find out, Zimpel developed a method of pouring clear resin into a baking mold, where it hardened. He then made a ‘mark’ with his paintbrush. Once that dried, he poured another layer of resin. When that was solid, he popped the disc out of the mold and, at last, had a direct view of the brushstroke’s underside. After making several more, he began to investigate the marks more closely, using magnification photography. The swirling, overlapping, stratified and splattered configurations of paint revealed themselves through the help of high-powered lenses. “I had the revelation that, in every single mark, there is an entire universe.”



Since that successful experiment, he has facilitated the production of dozens of these palm-sized treasures—marks made by children, non-artist adults, and professional artists alike. To show that any intentional, deliberately made mark is art, Zimpel photographs them with various lighting sources including regular photography lights and candlelight. The results are the astonishing photographs lining Arts at Large’s gallery walls.

In the summer of 2019, Zimpel traveled to the Philippines to paint the landscape for friends who had moved away and missed their home. He was taken to the Taal volcano, invisible from its location in the middle of a serene lake surrounded by tropical foliage and terrain. Zimpel was introduced to a local jewelry maker, who gifted him a bright red chunk of volcanic rock. “You should paint with this,” she told him. Thanking her, he put it in his camera bag, then forgot about it.

A few months later, the Taal volcano erupted. It was a spectacular explosion, broadcast worldwide, with dramatic bolts of lightning and billowing clouds of gray volcanic ash spewing from the middle of an otherwise still lake. “It was so strangely beautiful,” he recalled, “and at first I was mesmerized. But then, I couldn’t stop thinking about all the wildlife and animals on that lush island, turned to dust.”

He remembered the rock in his camera bag. Paint with it. He shaved some of the bright red dust into some linseed oil, mixed it, and made his mark. As the mark interacted with the hot resin, the pigment reacted, forming trails and swirls, erupting, as a miniature volcano. The rock dust seemed to be alive. It was the first time he had painted with organic substance.

“I saw that...paint color is way more alive in a natural pigment than it was in...commercially prepared pigment, which up to that point was pretty much my whole relationship with paint. It was the first time I thought about the difference between natural color and processed color.”

If Jeff Zimple is an art shaman, color is his energizing spirit guide. “During the pandemic, I went for long walks by myself in the Chequamegon National Forest up north. I’d been on those paths so many times, I could anticipate every curve, every fallen tree I’d seen before...I realized there was so much forest I wasn’t considering because I’d become numb to it. I was alone, so I got off the path, and suddenly I didn’t know how to move, when everything was so dense and weird! I began to manipulate my focus, blurring my vision, so I could just see, just sense the color, and the most vibrant color would guide me. I was pulled by the most compelling color towards one fascinating place after another. That’s how I began to move...”



Since then, as explorer and seeker of organic pigment, Zimpel has traveled through Peru, the Philippines, Isle Royale National Park along Lake Superior, through the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and to many sites along the shores of Lake Michigan. “Otherwise, my pigment friends are a network stretching the globe - I plan to continue traveling with pigments in mind, as well as continuing to connect with pigment people.”

In his transition from commercial to organic pigment, Zimpel also forages for found nature as art making tools. He makes brushes from horsetail hair inserted into hollow reeds; he collects bamboo, driftwood, willow branches, mushrooms, leaves, bone, teeth, seaweed, thistle, leaves. “Anything and everything that speaks to me.”

As for pigment: “If you can grind it up and make it into a dust, it can become paint.”

During his tenure as Artist-in-Residence, Zimpel is on site at Arts at Large leading workshops and small group collaborative engagement in making and marveling at made marks. “I am inviting people to push around some colorful dust knowing it’s going to be interesting. I photograph those marks so they can see what they did. Then they can identify as an artist. It can transform them, their way of thinking about themselves, who they are, what they’re capable of. And if that happens, more people may feel free to transform, to entertain thoughts and ways of being. That’s kind of the whole goal, what I want to do with my art.”

It's how he manages to maintain his hopefulness in this hazardous world.

“The photographs are of very little bits of paint, marks made by me, by five year-olds, by eighty-five year-olds, by every type of person—by artists, by people who don’t identify as artists, people who would claim that they can’t make art and yet all they have to do is push a little paint around, and I can go in there and see this amazing creation. There are little universes in all these marks. It kind of ups the stakes of doing anything. We have an impact that it’s hard to be aware of because it’s happening on such a small level.... I find ‘the mark,’ the first step of any composition, a hopeful one. There’s plenty to not be hopeful about, but this...it’s human potential on display.”



About the Author

Lynn Cohen is a poet-writer, cellist, and Rolfer.
She lives in and loves Milwaukee.