

ME - I met you through the Facebook group St. Paul Underground Artists League. Tell me more about the group, how and why it started, and what your goals are for the group.

LE - The group started in late 2014 I think. My friend and fellow artist Marty Owings called me up and said I'm thinking of starting a Facebook group. I'm pretty sure I replied something like, What's a Facebook group? I was pretty new to social media in those days.

So the St. Paul Underground Artists League was born, mostly as a way to let other Twin Cities artists know when and where Marty and I were going to be meeting up on the weekends, usually at one coffee shop or another, to work on our art.

I was skeptical that anyone else would join us, but artists did come, and many kept coming back. When the pandemic hit we of course stopped meeting. After a month or so it really set in that we were likely in a long term lock down, and Marty and I decided to test a group meeting online, and we've been meeting on Zoom every Sunday morning for more than a year now.

What's interesting is we began to get artists from all over the place, not just the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Many artists were feeling isolated, groups they had been meeting with locally had shut down temporarily or ceased to exist altogether.

Now on any given Sunday we have people joining us from other states and other countries. "All are welcome, all are invited," I always include on the weekly invite, and it's true. I think the St. Paul Underground Artists League has become something a bit more necessary than we originally ever intended, giving artists a way to interact with other creatives in a time when that sort of interaction has become much more difficult to find.

ME - What is your artistic background?

LE - Some would say I have none, that I'm that mysterious thing called "self-taught," but I don't think anyone is truly self-taught. We all have our influences and our stories that turn us into whatever kinds of artists we are.

When I was a kid I loved to draw and I did a lot of trying to draw the way other artists did, particularly comic book artists, and of those, the ones who drew horror comics were my favorites. These artists were producing really moody, haunting stuff, and they weren't just drawing, they were storytelling, and I was just blown away by that, the way a single drawing could contain so much story.

It was the mid 1970s, so you had American artists like Berni Wrightson doing amazing work on Swamp Thing, Jim Aparo drawing superbly shadowy art on Phantom Stranger, but the best work was being done by Spanish artists like Pepe Gonzalez, Esteban Maroto and others who were drawing for Warren magazines like Creepy, Eerie, and Vampirella (I don't think my parents had any idea what I was reading).

I couldn't draw like these artists, not even close, but I sure tried, and I think these art/brain connections you make as a child just stay with you and continue teaching you, regardless of any formal art instruction you might get as you move through life.

I did take a basic drawing class at the University of Wisconsin one semester and the instructor told me that my work was really good and that I really set a standard for the class, but I was 21

and wasn't planning to become an artist, and really wasn't paying attention. But that class was the first time someone handed me an ink pen for drawing and I found I really liked it.

ME - What type of art do you create and what motivates you to create it?

LE - I'm definitely not a still life artist. Things need to be moving in my work, even if it's just the wind. So you'll never catch me drawing a bowl of fruit, unless the apples and bananas are trying to escape the bowl.

I love drawing people who are just going about their lives, and animals, I just finished a big 18x24 ink drawing of two buffalo grazing in a winter grassland, a hint of snow-covered mountains in the distance. A lot of my work has snow in it, I think winter is just beautiful. I work mostly from photo reference, I constantly am taking pictures to be used later as reference and I have a lot of old black and white photos that I use for this too.

Between 2007 and 2018, I traveled internationally quite a bit for work (boring computer system stuff, you don't want to hear about it) and I drew wherever I went, sometimes drawing all night in my hotel room unable to sleep from jet lag. I managed my time well on these trips and got out to see as much as I could when I wasn't working.

I really think that all of that travel pushed my art to evolve faster than it would have otherwise. In 2014 I became prolific. It began with a drawing of a street scene in Buenos Aires which I called "Lord of Belgrano." When I finished it, it was as if a little voice in my head that hadn't been there before was whispering "More."

I have averaged around 50 new pieces a year ever since. I just can't shake this feeling that I haven't created enough art and I have to do more. I can maybe go three days after I finish a drawing until I get that itch that tells me I have to start another. The good news in all this is that I end up with a lot of finished art, and also I'll probably get a mental disorder named after me.

ME - What process, materials, techniques, etc. do you use to create your artwork?

LE - I am a pen and ink artist and the main technique I like to use is stippling, which is pointillism (lots of dots) using only one color, in my case usually black. Generally I draw with two pens, a Lamy Al-Star fountain pen with a converter filled with Platinum Carbon ink and a Platinum Carbon ink brush pen.

Platinum Carbon is a wonderful ink for the type of work I do because it is extremely opaque, it dries relatively quickly on paper, yet, and here is the most amazing quality of this ink, it will practically never clog a fountain pen.

With regular use, I never have to clean my pen, although if the pen sits unused for a month that's a different story. I like to draw on smooth Bristol, but also find that some really good watercolor paper takes ink well.

I start each piece with a simple light pencil sketch that I will eventually ink over. I don't sketch-in everything, just some outlines as I make decisions on where I want things in the drawing. The fine details I add in ink. Then I just have to trust the process, as they say.

My work takes time and often it can be many hours until I can see whether it's all going to come together the way I want. Sometimes it doesn't. Maybe one in twenty will just go totally off the

rails, and that's ok. There's usually a bit of swearing before the failed piece goes into the awful art drawer. Every artist has one.

ME - Are there specific subjects or themes you return to regularly in your art? If so, what are they, and do you know why?

LE - I grew up in St. Paul, a child of the 70s, and I spent a lot of time outside even on really cold days. I could walk to the Mississippi River from my house in about 15 minutes. The forest at the bottom of the river bluffs was my playground in the summer, and there were secret waterfalls that would freeze like prisms in winter.

In the early mornings you could hear owls and the low distant hum of riverboat engines. Sometimes I am sitting at my drawing table, it is snowing outside my window and the wind is howling and all of the magic of my childhood comes back to me and it has a huge influence on my artwork.

So yes, there are definitely themes like my love of winter and nature and water and living creatures and the beautiful, wonderful mundanity of everyday life.

ME - How does art-making impact other parts of your life?

LE - There's just something immensely satisfying about living a creative life. I was 38 when I decided to go get some art supplies and start drawing again, and really it was just because I was looking for a hobby to relieve stress, and I remembered how much I had enjoyed drawing when I was younger.

My first new drawings were generally not that good, but I didn't care because I was enjoying myself. Seven years later I sold a piece of artwork for the first time. Never in a million years did I think my artwork would evolve to the point where I could sell it, but it turns out that nonsense our parents told us about getting better by practicing something a lot actually turned out to be true.

Suddenly I began to think maybe I'm an artist, and many aspects of my life were changed by this thought. A few years ago I was sitting in a work meeting for some new project and we were introducing ourselves to each other, and someone actually said they had a real passion for protecting company data.

I remember thinking, Really? Passion? Now I'm not sure what sort of relationship this person may or may not have been having with Word and Excel documents at the office, but it was in that moment that I realized I no longer described myself in terms of my job. Somewhere along the line I went from thinking of myself as a computer systems analyst who drew pictures to an artist who happens to make his living as a computer systems analyst. Don't get me wrong, I like my job and I'm good at it, but the thing is I have a real passion for drawing.

ME - What else would you like to talk about?

LE - I can wiggle my ears. Also I take commissions, for art, not for ear wiggling. I don't charge for that. If you'd like to commission a piece or are interested in purchasing one of my existing drawings, please contact me at [larryehrllichartist@gmail.com](mailto:larryehrllichartist@gmail.com). Free ear wiggle with each purchase.

I really enjoy showing my work and talking to people about my work. I was supposed to have an art show at Unity Unitarian Church in St. Paul last August, but of course it got canceled due to the pandemic. I've been told it will be rescheduled for sometime in 2021 or 2022, but I don't have an exact date yet.