

NICHE: A WEEKLY PEEK AT AN EMERGING ARTIST

Mark Mueller

By SARA AGNEW of the Tribune's staff

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Mark Mueller knew from an early age that he was gay.

But his sexuality wasn't something Mueller shared with people in his small hometown. Folks in Nacogdoches, Texas, were mostly conservative, and besides, Mueller's dad was a military man and his mom a nurse for a local pediatrician. Being gay was something he felt obligated to hide.

But it's tough to live a full life in disguise.

Before long, the secret Mueller was trying to hide caught up with him, and his sexuality was revealed in a rather humiliating way - he was kicked out of the Navy for having an affair with another man in the military.

However, what often feels like the end is only the beginning, and so it was with Mueller.

After leaving the military, Mueller began working with a marketing group, where he took an interest in graphic art. Inspired by the possibilities, he enrolled at the University of Texas-Arlington, where he planned to combine his interests in business and graphic arts. But when he took a sculpture class, his plans changed again.

"I fell in love with it," Mueller recalled.

And the pieces of his life began to come together.

Today, at age 39, Mueller is a candidate for a master of fine arts degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His 14-piece thesis exhibit, titled "Understanding," opens tomorrow at the Bingham Gallery on the southwest corner of Hitt Street and University Avenue in the Fine Arts Building at MU. A public reception will be held from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday in the gallery, where the exhibit runs through Oct. 28. Gallery hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Mueller hopes his exhibit - which includes sculptures and multimedia presentations - will promote a better understanding of a gay man's life. The pieces in the show reveal Mueller's growth as an artist and his journey toward finding peace within himself. He hopes to continue making art and to perhaps one day teach, as well.

"I've really discovered that I enjoy teaching," he said. "It's a way to get the word out on art."



Don Shrubshell photo

Many of Mueller's early pieces tend to emphasize, rather than de-emphasize, distinctions of gay culture. The pieces are more aggressive and in-your-face about their messages.

"I wanted to shock and dismay the audience," Mueller admitted. "The main purpose was to beat my drum."

For example, one of his early pieces, called "Toy Box," is a wooden box filled with toys most parents would be shocked to find in the possession of their sons. There are two scantily dressed GI Joes embracing and a toy pistol with a barrel that has been transformed into a phallic symbol.

But as he became more comfortable with himself and with his artistic abilities, Mueller's work softened and became subtler.

"Perceptions of gay culture have been generally negative in the past. The political atmosphere of the '60s and '70s prevented many gay men to acknowledge and accept their sexual orientation," he wrote in a statement about his exhibit. "Some artists of this time tended to perpetuate this negative perception by creating works that emphasized the distinctions and differences of gay culture."



Don Shrubshell photo

Artist Mark Mueller's "Toy Box" is filled with items including two scantily dressed GI Joes and a toy pistol with a barrel that has been transformed into a phallic symbol.

However, Mueller said mainstream society's acceptance of homosexuality in the past decade has helped him to focus less on the distinctions and differences of gay culture.

"I didn't want to alienate people with my artwork," he said.

Mueller said that recent television shows such as "Will and Grace" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" have perpetuated stereotypes about gay men, showing them as hip, fashionable guys who know everything about interior decorating and cooking.

"If there is any message I want to get across with this show, it's that we're like everyone else," Mueller said. "We get up like everyone else and put on our pants like everyone else."

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A greater understanding

Art becomes the means of discussing human issues and false presumptions

BY GENEVIEVE CONTEY

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In Mark Mueller's chilly but spacious sculpture studio in MU's Marx Building, one can't help but notice the life-size molds of human heads that sit on a nearby utility shelf — molds that bear a striking resemblance to Mueller.

Mueller created the molds using a technique called life casting, which employs plaster and algiform, an algae-based material commonly used for dental impressions. He employs this form of self-portraiture in his sculptures to express the common humanity that exists between homosexual and heterosexual society. Mueller, who began making masks in his first year as a master's candidate in fine arts, is using his own likeness to unmask life as a gay man.

"I was used to putting on this mask to hide the true essence of my being," Mueller says. "Now my art reflects my true identity."

Artistic representation of gay culture dates back to antiquity, when homosexuality was a common theme. The ancient Greeks, for instance, invoked the imagery of nude males on their intricately painted vases. However, self-expression as a specific goal of gay-themed art is a relatively recent trend, dating back only 300 to 400 years, says art historian John Klein, associate professor of modern and contemporary art at MU.

For example, once the nude male form became an accepted element of Greek art, it was considered a classical subject that many artists of 19th-century Europe began to explore. It was not unusual for artists of any sexual orientation to look to the past to legitimize their contemporary artistic interests, Klein says.

Mueller's sculpture, *Amerikana*, has three life-size ceramic heads in red, white and blue that represent limitations on freedom of expression.

Society's awareness and acceptance of homosexuality has greatly improved over the years, but certain subthemes of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender culture are less understood or discussed. Ryan Stevens, a senior art student at MU, says his artwork focuses on the lesser-publicized elements of LGBT culture, namely drag performance and transgender hate crime.

Stevens' photographic study of a local drag performer, known only as Jason, was recently on display at [Club Shattered](#). The series of seven color photographs intimately document the performer's methodical transformation to his female stage persona, Ginger.

“The common misconception about drag queens is that they are people who live as women,” Stevens says, “but it’s really about performance and not lifestyle.”

Mueller and Stevens are two Columbia artists who are trying, through their work, to foster a greater awareness and acceptance of the LGBT community. Mueller, 39, has just completed his master’s thesis exhibition at MU’s Bingham Gallery. Titled “Understanding,” the show featured an eclectic mix of traditional and nontraditional sculptural works designed to dispel myths and stereotypes about gay men.

“Many of us in the gay culture are on the edge of society,” Mueller says. “We’re seen as having a different life, not lifestyle. Lifestyle tends to be a word that connotes choice, but life is what you’re born with. That’s what my thesis is essentially about.”

Some of Mueller’s signature pieces from “Understanding” are part of his first professional exhibit, on display at the Boone County Historical Society Museum through Jan. 30. Fittingly called “Introduction,” the exhibit is an opportunity for Mueller to introduce himself as a local artist. It will also be another forum for Mueller to display works that underscore the commonalities that exist between gay culture and mainstream society.

What makes some of Mueller’s work visually intriguing is its use of faces and heads. “Amerikana” is three life-size ceramic heads in Mueller’s image, glazed in red, white and blue. The ears of one head, as well as the eyes of the second and the mouth of the third, are covered to represent limitations on freedom of expression.

“Whether you’re gay or straight, Republican or Democrat, those are the things that each of us has to deal with,” Mueller says. “We all have limitations to our freedoms.”

"Fruit of Choice"

Mueller has perfected a process whereby he can reduce his casts to half their linear size and one-third their volume. In “Fruit of Choice,” a sculpture that took nearly a year to complete and reflects the artist’s attention to detail, rows of glass jars containing more than 100 miniature heads are stacked on a simulated pantry shelf, arranged in the spectrum of colors of the gay pride flag. The piece evokes a display of jams and preserved fruit. Mueller says the title of the piece speaks to a demeaning term for gays as well as the perception that homosexuality is a choice rather than something ingrained from birth.

The work was inspired by a bittersweet conversation with Mueller’s grandmother, who inquired, somewhat innocently, “What type of food do your people eat?” For Mueller, the comment underscored the fact that although his grandmother felt they were the same on many levels, she believed that gay men lived much differently from heterosexuals.

Mueller also uses bronze, stainless steel, papier-mâché and even household items, such as canning jars and trash cans. Some of his most compelling sculptures employ electronic media. “Momisms and Dadisms,” a self-portrait, is an imposing black tower built to the height and width of Mueller’s own body frame and is fitted with two television screens. On one screen, Mueller, whose eyes are concealed by dark sunglasses, lip-synchs to recordings of his father’s voice as he

advises his son. On the other screen, Mueller employs his stepmother's voice to spout the common truisms any children might hear from their mothers .

"These are the voices I heard growing up, from my father and mother," Mueller says. "While they are specific to me, they are very universal. These guideposts are given to us at a certain time of our lives to give us some guiding truth but then as we go on, we find these are not necessarily truth — some are false."

Deborah Slade Thompson, the director of the [Boone County Historical Society](#), was particularly intrigued by Mueller's use of electronic media in his sculptures. She appreciates not only the theme of commonality that resonates in "Momisms and Dadisms," but also the fine craftsmanship of Mueller's works overall.

"We selected Mark's work because it's technically sound and shows good workmanship," Thompson says. "We're not viewing Mark as a gay artist but as an artist with something to say."

His studies at University of Texas Arlington

Mueller had wanted to use his art to talk about gay life as an undergraduate at the [University of Texas Arlington](#), where he received a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1996. But his professors told him it was inappropriate to do so. When it came time for Mueller to think about graduate school in 2001, he looked for programs that would embrace his plans. Of those he looked at, MU was the only one that would allow him to explore the theme of gay culture for his thesis.

"Mark is trying to articulate a social agenda with his work to engender inclusion and tolerance in society," says associate professor of art Jim Calvin, Mueller's thesis adviser.

Much of the work focused on homosexuality in recent past has tended to be intentionally shocking and show the irreconcilable differences between mainstream culture and homosexuality, Calvin says. "Mark is diverging from this. His take on this is a response to the evolving view of homosexuals in our world."

Calvin points to one of Mueller's most significant works, "Duality," a bronze sculpture of a head with twin faces lying on its side. A large sphere atop the faces represents the crushing burden that some gay men feel.

"The 'Duality' piece gets at the notion of two forces at work," Calvin says. "The demands put on you by your genetic material that says you're gay and the demands of society that says you better not be gay."

The future

Mueller's goal is to continue creating art, which — like the pieces in the "Introduction" exhibit — attempt to de-emphasize the differences between gay and mainstream culture and that will be viewed as more inclusive in nature.

"I'll continue to be subtle in my approach," Mueller says. "I get a greater audience because aggressive pieces can turn people off too quickly before they absorb the information that is in the piece."

Like Mueller, Ryan Stevens thinks that showing the humanity of his subjects will foster a greater understanding and acceptance of LGBT culture. Stevens says his art takes on drag performance and transgender issues not only because they are under- or misrepresented in the popular media, but also because they impact people he is close to. He also gets inspiration from political issues that affect the LGBT community, he says.

One of Stevens' signature photographs, called "Reflections," shows Jason, the drag performer, in full makeup, wig and dress with his back to a full-length mirror. A smaller mirror on a far wall captures Jason at yet another angle.

"I'm trying to show a person who is assuming a character rather than someone who conforms to negative stereotypical representations," Stevens says.

A photograph called "Ginger and Dustin" is an intimate close-up of Jason's partner, Dustin, applying the final touches of make-up that will transform Jason into Ginger. Stevens says it shows an honest moment shared between two people.

Mark Mueller's more recent work focuses on creating a more positive understanding of gay culture and particularly the lives of gay men.

Although he loves the camera, Stevens' favorite art medium is powdered charcoal, which gives his drawings greater volume and weight and allows for a more intimate experience between the art and the artist.

In particular, Stevens uses charcoal to address transgender hate crime. Transgender is a broader term to describe people who outwardly display the characteristics and behaviors of the gender that they identify with, in spite of being physically of the opposite sex. This is different from transsexuals, who desire to make the actual physical transformation from male to female, or vice versa.

Not well understood by mainstream society, transgender issues remain highly stigmatized, and such people often risk persecution and violence.

"This is going to become a serious issue," Stevens says, "since there are a few events like this that are unprecedented, specifically the story of Brandon Teena," an abused transgender teenager who was the subject of the movie "Boys Don't Cry."

Stevens' drawing "The Murder of Amanda Milan" is based on a news story in 2000 about a transgender woman — born Damon Lee Dyer — whose throat was slit in front of New York City's Port Authority bus station.

The black-on-grey piece depicts the violence and rage of the attacker and features four quadrants of imagery: a drawing of the photo included in a newspaper article, a male figure sitting in front of a dressing room mirror, a juxtaposed male/female symbol signifying transgender individuals and a taxi cab because Milan was killed in front of a taxi stand.

Stevens says his style of drawing is inspired by political artist Sue Coe, whose dark, overt and direct drawings “take the gloss off things that people don’t want to think about.”

“The Murder of Amanda Milan” is Stevens’ most significant piece of work, he says, because “it addresses an extremity and an important issue” that goes largely unnoticed by mainstream society.

“My work hopes to humanize these issues,” Stevens says, “to make them seem less objectified.”

Stevens’ work will be available for viewing at MU’s Bingham Gallery through Jan. 14.