

Matt Semke

Zabby took the opportunity to sit down with Minnesotan, and self-proclaimed “real living artist” Matt Semke. Marketing Director by day, rouge artist by night, Semke can often be found in his studio late into the evenings. His laboratory is a kin to a working brain, firing electrical pulses of sarcasm, observation, passion and aggression. Matt is a scientist. Sure, his methods are cliché in the art world. Yet, somewhere between conception and creation Semke is able to twist them into a truly great and interactive message, in a way rarely expressed by other artists today.

To understand Semke we need to take a trip into his youth. Born amongst the dairy farms of Western Wisconsin, nurtured on the breast of Catholicism and small town ethics, Semke encountered a fairly common realization only smart kids achieve; he did not identify with the community around him. Opting not to wrap his insecurities in racism, sexism or any other ism, he pinned who he was to his sleeve for all to see and in some cases to even hate.

As far as young artists are concerned, Semke’s art has begun to generate attention, not only locally, but internationally. Having forged his slippery hooks into the Midwest punk rock community through the music of his band Straight to Your Brain, he has found a new and comfortable perch as a sort of a peoples’ artist. Besides creating art for his own musical projects, his creations can be found on the cover of the recently released Brokedowns album, “New Brains for Everyone” via Thick Records and amongst several artists in a limited edition art book to be packaged with the new FT Shadow Government record. In retaliation to the politics interwoven into small communities, he has even found himself in the center of a growing controversy in a usually quiet and serene Southern Minnesota town.

[Zabby]

You recently participated in an art project called “Blue Heron Project,” what exactly was it about?

The Blue Heron Committee of Winona is a group of artists who decided to have a statue event, just like the events in a lot of cities where they design statues to place around the city. Minneapolis has the Peanuts Gang characters, Madison did a thing with cows everywhere.

Wasn’t that in Chicago?

Madison did it too. Artists submitted proposals describing how they would design their Heron. I thought the contest was corny and didn’t like the rules, so I submitted three ideas, sarcastic really. I was trying to make a jab at the committee, but they accepted one of them. I was shocked, I could not believe that they could not figure out it was a joke. Maybe they knew and just liked it anyways.

Which one of the three entries did

they accept?

The one they accepted was called “Artists Selected Will Be Required to Sign a Contract”, (Laughter) -- that’s what I titled it. But they wrote me back stating “Your entry “Bird in Red Cage” was accepted,” so I wrote them back, stating I didn’t enter the contest with that title, but I have an entry that is a bird with a red cage around it called “Artists Selected Will Be Required to Sign a Contract”.

How did they respond to your letter, did they care?

That was one of the things they just didn’t respond to. But I am sure it was their first attempt to get me to try and title it something else, you know? At one of the meetings with the accepted artists we had to go up, then they told me the title was too long and that I needed to shorten it. The wording is directly from their rules, so I didn’t change it. The Winona State University Alumni committee sponsored my bird and they hate the fact that it is on their campus. I guess some people complain about it, some like it. The local newspaper did a feature on how it basically mocked the contest.

In connection with this project, you mention on your website that the mayor “donated” some items to you for the project...

MS - In the contract that we signed it said we may not be reimbursed for any supplies used in the making of this bird and that we would not get any money for our time. My biggest concern was not breaking even on the project, I’ve



never welded before and I don’t know how much metal pipes cost. Everyone I talked to said it would cost a couple hundred dollars. The committee was nice enough to ask the mayor of Winona, who owns a scrap metal company, and he let me take anything I wanted. There was three feet of snow on the ground, so I could not really even see the stuff I was getting. I got a bunch of rusted pipes and mangled conduit and the mayor walked out, kicked this stuff with his boot, went back in the office and writes me out a receipt saying in was a \$150.00 donation!

No!

MS - Yeah! So I get these pipes back to the garage where I am welding, (the guys there weld drag racers). They look at this pile of rusty pipes and just start laughing hysterically, telling me this stuff is not worth \$150! It’s like \$10 worth of crap, if I’m lucky. They tell me it will not work, the rules also stated the art had to be safe, like kids were going to climb on this or something. So now I’m building a safe cage someone could climb on. I decided to go to the local hardware store and just buy a pipe bender and some real aluminum conduit that would actually work. I spent \$200, but the mayor gets to write off the junk I hauled away. (Laughter)

Your art is very interactive, you demand the viewers participate and interact with it.

My Roommate Billy and I came up with this idea.

Who is Billy?

Billy Hessian. We call it Endeavorism. We consider it an interaction, forcing the viewer to become a participant and creator. Billy does some art scavenger hunts. I put my art on different buildings and make people go get the art.

You do a lot of local art shows around the Minneapolis / Saint Paul area, how do the older artists react to this way you approach your work?

I think they like that I involve people in the art, for the past 50 years art has gotten away from the viewer and become very elitist, like a status symbol instead of a life enhancer. I get comments from older artists wondering how I am going to make money off of this, because in a lot of cases I am just giving the art away. You know, you've just got to explain to them I'm not too concerned with the money. I make my money at my job.

You sell a good amount of art via your website every month, is that were most of your sales originate?

Most of my art is sold online. I sell to total strangers, via email.

Where are the people from who purchase your art. Are they local and international?

Mostly people in the states. But I've also had customers in Europe, Australia and Chili, which is exciting.

You seem to enjoy working with Billy, tell me about some of your collaborations.

We met in college and used to actually wrestle for fun, *Fight Club* style – fists and everything. We thought it was fun. It was never scary, just a good time. Then one time I cracked Billy's head open on a vacuum cleaner. Another time, I had to go to the emergency room the next day because I hyper-extended my knee. So we decided it would be more constructive to just be competitive with our art rather than hitting each other. It just accelerated. We have done about seven shows together over the last four years.

The show that sticks out in my mind is when you each created monster paintings, the audience voted on their favorite and the loser's painting got the axe, you guys literally put it on a chopping block and bashed the crap out of it.

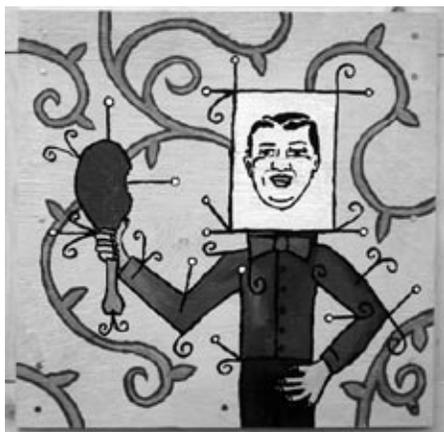
We really liked the idea that some art is better than other art and that art will not be around forever. We thought we would just speed up the process by letting people vote on what they thought was good.

There is a great three-minute video full of great clips of the actual bashing.

One guy decided to buy the whole collection, he paid for the axe too.

What is your favorite medium?

I don't really know, if had to only take one with me onto a deserted island, I would pick drawing – it's immediate.



Tell me about the time your dad shot the wood chuck that was eating his garden veggies.

I brought my girl friend to my parents' house for her birthday and right after we sang happy doodah to her, my dad just gets up, leans out the porch door and blasts this woodchuck in his garden. He really has no courtesy for the company. (Laughter)

Was that a part of your small town upbringing?

It shows what I grew up around. I don't think my dad was irrational for shooting the woodchuck, it was eating his green beans

Besides being an artist, you are also a musician, how his your music an extension of your art?

Music is just another painting or drawing. My friend once told me that I play my guitar exactly like I draw. Music has really affected my approach to art. Punk rock is so DIY and the art scene as a whole is not really DIY. Punk rock is approachable and people can really feel included, the audience is a part of it. I want art to be more like that.

As a kid growing up in the middle of Wisconsin, what was the first punk rock record you got? If you say Oplvy I am going to puke.

It was the Offspring's *Smash*. (Laughter) I was a big fan of Nirvana too. It was easy to play on guitar. When I grew up, I started to really identify with the politics as well. Now I am really into Shellac, Toys that Kill, Modest Mouse, Lightning Bolt, Stnng, Falcon Crest, FT Shadow Government. I like a lot of local stuff.

Tell me about the upcoming FT Shadow Government release.

I think it is 100 special edition records packaged with a booklet of art by several different artists who all had to hand make each piece of art. We could not photocopy or anything.

How do your parents view your art? Are they still waiting for this to pass?

They are at the point now where they know it is not a phase. This is very recent. When I had to talk to my dad about buying his axe, that was when it hit them. I show art all the time now, so they know I am going to do this for a long time. They have never seen my band play, but they have been to a few of my art shows, they glance around.

You have a lot of art that portrays your penis, your faculties. What do they say about that?

They have seen the art. My dad will ask me what's going on inside my head. He's glad that he does not have that going on inside of his head. (Laughter)

**Check out more of Semke's artwork at:
www.catswilleatyou.com**

