Art For All: Meet the Street Artist-Turned Fine Artist Who Wants to Make Art Accessible
By: Marlo Jappen

Adam O'Day sprawls his paintings across a piece of tapestry like a vagabond setting up camp. It's the night of the Boston Music Awards, which takes place at the Lawn on D in Southie. As dub step music blares from the stage, Adam sits behind a table displaying his artwork. A passerby stops and examines a tray painted with a vibrant scene of the Boston skyline. The image flashes with bright, dreamy colors and a price tag of 75 bucks. "Hey, man, do you think I could roll a joint on this?" he asks Adam. "Yeah, dude, that's what it's made for," Adam says.

"Dude" is a word he often uses, even when addressing ladies, along with other slangs: "rad," "dope," and "killer." Fully bearded and built like a teddy bear, his most striking feature is his blond hair, which falls down to his shoulders. Adam, nonchalant in demeanor, thinks of himself as an average guy. Don't be fooled. Right before this gig, he spent his afternoon signing more than 500 prints of his mural for Boston Bruins players and executives. The TD Garden commissioned Adam to paint the mural in celebration of its 20th birthday.

Last summer, he won the Portrait of a City contest with his painting, "Transit." Mayor Walsh purchased 30 reproductions of the piece as gifts for visiting diplomats and other distinguished guests. Adam was chosen amongst a slew of notable Boston artists. While the other submissions were traditional and reflected reality, "Transit" incorporated, in Adam's words, "random-ass neon colors."

Despite the prestigious awards he's racked up over the years, Adam participates in free events such as this festival because he wants to make the fine art scene more accessible. "Art should be a nice, welcoming industry and it's totally not," he says. He believes it should be inclusive of everyone—not just the champagne-sipping snobs who schmooze at galleries. Adam puts this philosophy to action as he passes out free postcards of his prints to anyone who visits his table. "Everyone should walk away with something," he says. He

priced some of his pieces as low as $20 so he doesn't ward off patrons who can't afford his more expensive paintings, which sell for $3,000.

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At the festival, a woman admires one of Adam's large-scale works "It's gorgeous," she says to him.

"I made it from garbage," he responds.

Adam uses everyday materials—from household sponges to discarded doorframes—to create art that connects with everyday people. His distinctive, gritty style grabs viewers' attention but it's the emotions he conveys in his work that keep them intrigued. Although publications such as *The Boston Globe and Art New England* have classified his work with words straight from an art history textbook ("impressionism" and "expressionism"), Adam doesn't care about definitions. "It's whatever it makes you feel," he says. Instead of painting honest depictions of scenes ("What's the point of that? You can just take a photograph."), Adam prefers to capture what he remembers. He likes to use juxtaposition. One of Adam's paintings portrays Provincetown—a community known for its liveliness—using drab, subdued tones. Another piece captures a dreary Boston cityscape with splashes of psychedelic colors. About ten years ago, after experiencing one of Boston's harsh winters, Adam began dipping his brush into more daring hues: Dorito dust oranges, radioactive greens, and electric blues. "I wanted to cheer myself up," he says. "I didn't want to paint with greys anymore."

His wife, Meghan, who visits Adam at the event with their 14-month-old daughter, Penny, in tow, says his style appeals to a wide audience.

"I don't really see other art that is similar," she explains. "It's expressive. You can see a lot in it. I love the range of different feelings people get from it."

Adam follows Penny as she crawls across the grass, meandering between jugglers tossing light-up balls. For Adam, fatherhood has influenced him to create some art kids would enjoy. He points out one his paintings resting on the tapestry: a rainbow castle. He's also writing and illustrating a children's book, *Herman Worm Man Learns a Lesson*, which features a mischievous worm with a spikey tail. "He cruises around and destroys shit on accident," Adam explains. "He has to learn to clean up after himself and take responsibility for his actions because he's terrorizing the countryside." Adam admits he modeled Herman after his own persona. "I fuck shit up on accident," he says. "I'm not careful. I'm a messy person."

The festival draws to a close, prompting Adam to secure his paintings with bubble wrap and pack them into his white Mazda. Although none of Adam's artwork sold, he doesn't leave disappointed. He receives an email from someone he met at the festival who wants to hire him for two commissions. "Totally worth it," Adam says.

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Adam is from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, but he moved around to Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia, just to name a few locations, because of his dad's job as a global contractor. "At the time, I was pissed off about it," he says. "But, now I'm grateful for the experiences I had and the places I got to see."

Now 34 years old, Adam's interest in art harkens back to his childhood. He had loads of energy back then and would get distracted in class. When asked by his parents if he wanted medication, Adam said no because he didn't think anything was wrong with him.

One day, Adam's teacher approached him about his rambunctious behavior, not with a stern lecture, but with a question: **"**What do you feel like doing when you're being disruptive?" Adam's response was simple. "I love drawing," he said. His family promoted his artistic behavior. In particular, he and his grandmother visited museums together.

Adam was determined to pursue art the moment his high school peers told him he couldn't do it. "Those are the same people who will comment on my shit on Facebook and say 'I'm so glad you're still at it bro.'" He earned a BFA in Illustration and Design in 2005 from Lesley College of Art and Design (then called the Art Institute of Boston). Afterwards, he spent five years designing ships for the Navy. "I felt like it was destroying my soul," Adam says. He remembers feeling "total paranoia" during meetings with government officials. The negative energy in the room was stifling. "Being in an office with tons of people," Adam says. "It's not for me." Meghan urged him to quit. "This job is killing you," she said. She noticed how much he enjoyed painting—which he did any chance he got—so she encouraged him to do it full time. After a year, Adam listened. "I wouldn't have had the guts to quit my job without her," he says. "He was just scared because the whole world was telling us to live a certain way," Meghan explains. "I never had any doubts," she says. "I never thought, 'this won't work.'"

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Adam's artwork lives all around Boston. It decorates the side of the Verb Hotel near Fenway Park and the staircase of a smoke shop called Green Side Up in Allston. "It definitely draws people in," says Cam Schmitt, a Greenside Up employee. "So many people come down and take pictures of it." Street art is an accessible way for the public to experience art, but Adam says the City of Boston views it as progressive and risky. "They're scared of graffiti law reform," he says. Adam hopes to change this. He submitted a proposal to the City of Boston asking the mayor to give property owners an incentive to have public art outside of their building.

"Too many of my friends have to move away from this place because of [Boston's] laws," Adam says. "I want them to move back. I miss my friends."

A street artist named KDONZ, with whom he's collaborated on various projects, including the mural in Allston, relocated to Philadelphia in search of greater artistic freedom.

Over the course of three days, Adam accomplished his mural for the TD Garden in the empty arena. It spans 35-feet and portrays the stadium at nighttime standing out amongst skyscrapers, bridges, and explosions of color. The mural was unveiled to the public during the TD Garden's free birthday celebration on September 30th and visitors received complimentary prints.

"The thing about art is that you do it, and 99 percent of the time you're not there when people look at it," he says. "My favorite thing about this is seeing people and families posing in front of it."

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On a Saturday afternoon, Adam pulls up to a dive bar near his art studio in Abington: The Cellar Tavern. As its name implies, The Cellar is dark, drafty and located in a basement. Adam orders PBR beer and pizza with pineapple and bacon. He then reaches into his flannel pocket, grabs an American Spirit cigarette, and goes outside to take a drag. When returns, he vents about a negative experience he had with a gallery that day. Adam picked up his artwork and noticed they damaged his frames. He says it happens all the time. "People just think it's a fun-time hobby," Adam explains, dipping his pizza into Tabasco sauce. "But some people make a living off of it and take it seriously." Instead of getting bent out of shape over it, he decided to set an example. Adam told the gallery what they should've done and fixed the frames himself. "If I can treat people a little bit better than my experiences will probably be much better," he says. Adam gulps the remainder of his second beer and then heads to his studio.

The building looks like an abandoned tenement with its boarded-up windows and faded brick. (It was once the factory that manufactured Timberland boots.) Adam takes the stairs until he hits his studio on the top floor. The outside is covered with trash; the inside is covered with art. There's a detachable mannequin decorated like an Easter egg, color-splattered stools, giant blank canvases, and more paintings than wall. While blasting heavy metal music, Adam takes out a stash of weed and smokes it from a glass pipe. "The majority

of shit I'm painting I don't like," he says. "I just have to get the ideas out. I paint over most of them anyway."

But, he's been cranking at some of his pieces for years. One such painting depicts a school bus, boat, trailer, and house suspended in the sky with trees. "I gave zero fucks about anything," he says. "If you're doing something that interests you and you put your heart and soul into it then there'll probably be folks out there that appreciate it."

Equipped with a conventional oven, a couch, and a drum set (Adam is the drummer, songwriter, and vocalist of a two-man heavy metal band, Mollusk), his studio functions as his sanctuary. Adam flips through a book about the 20th century Austrian painter Egon Schiele. He's one of Adam's favorites. Egon was considered to be provocative during his time because he painted prostitutes and vagrants. Many of his pieces were burned for challenging cultural norms. "Everyone always told him the same things people tell anyone who's trying to be an artist. You can't do it. But he did it anyway. "

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Adam's exhibit at the Hynes Convention Center is the most expressive show he's ever done. He named it "Saturate" in response to galleries, strangers, and close friends who told him he was saturating the market with his artwork. He was producing too much, they said, and participating in too many shows. They advised him to take a break. Adam listened. As of last year, he didn't take part in any shows in Boston and instead focused on creating conceptual artwork that broke loose from the Boston landscapes he's known for painting. "Saturate," which runs from September through January, features pieces he created during that break. "I was trying to throw it back in those people 's faces that said I produce too much," Adam says.

On a Friday afternoon, Stephanie Dvareckas, an art consultant for the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, leads the way through Adam's exhibit. His artwork is fun and eye catching, a departure from the prim and polished pieces often found in upscale Boston

galleries. A sunny-yellow painting with tree houses and a background cobbled from sheet music and floor plans hangs across from a neon-green collage portraying meat and a hammerhead shark.

“I’ve gotten a lot of good comments from the people that work here and some people who wouldn’t necessarily go to galleries,” Stephanie says. “Everyone likes the color. They feel this connected to this.” The Massachusetts Convention Center Authority asked Adam to do the show at Hynes after his successful stint at a neighborhood exhibition that rotates at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center in South Boston. Stephanie says that “Saturate” reaches a diverse audience. “A lot of people who end up seeing the work are people here for conventions who don’t necessarily interact in the art world,” she says. This crowd includes businesspeople and scientists. An elderly man passes through, appreciating a large tribal mask covered with bright designs.

“Adam found that mask in a dumpster,” Stephanie whispers.