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From art cows to Mickey Mouse

Best known as the creator of the art cows, Kermit Eisenhut gives freely of his talent

By JOHNNY HOOKS Jul. 16, 2004



Kermit Eisenhut is fascinated with his smudgy fingerprints. He looks down at the glass table before him and laughs sheepishly.

“Wow, look at all those fingerprints,” he said. “Look how they reflect — man I love glass.”

Welcome to the mind of one of Houston’s most prolific and philanthropic artists. Art is not simply a passion for Eisenhut, but also a life long dream realized.

There are lots of artists who call Houston home, so what’s his secret to success in the topsy-turvy art world?

“Well, I’m not afraid to apply the principles of marketing to my business,” he said. “You have to record all your work, and I’m out there at events, creating art for charities, handing out business cards.

“I tell my students, you may think people won’t notice your submissions at different events, but I’m here to tell you, they do.”

When Kermit Eisenhut moved to Houston from Ohio in the early 1980s, it was his brother who said come west. Eisenhut was ready to make his first great life change, from his childhood home to Houston, city on the rise.

“I came and found a job from the Yellow Pages,” he said, foreshadowing his cover work for the GLBT Yellow Pages cover work.

“I have always had an interest in art, taking my coloring books and pens and paper and lying in front of the TV when I was a kid, and just going at it. So around 1990, I broke a disc in my back and was unable to continue with what I was doing.”

Eisenhut started taking classes at Houston Community College.

“The Fine Arts Building was brand new then,” he said. “My teacher was around my age and ironically, from Ohio. So we had a few things in common. He was the one who encouraged me to document my work, approach it with a business mind and to get involved with the community. I urge my students to do the same. Find something you’re passionate about and go for it!”

And go for it Eisenhut did. The 1990s saw an explosion of work from Eisenhut much of it with a nod to his love of animals (“Many people, myself included consider our pets our children”) and to AIDS outreach and advocacy.

He was ubiquitous in every DIFFA event: He created a chair for 1993’s “Take a Seat.”

His denim jacket brought the second highest bid for 1994’s live auction with celebrity host Steve Guttenberg. He sold both his handmade vests in the 1995 InVestment, and wowed attendees at “Boxing Back” with his beautiful confection.

His artwork graced the covers of the Gay & Lesbian Yellow Pages in cities such as Houston, Denver, New York, Phoenix and Atlanta to name a few.

The list of his contributions includes well-known names such as March of Dimes, Omega House, Special Olympics, Vivo y Positivo, PAWS, SPCA, Houston Grand Opera, Montrose Clinic and SEARCH.

Cow Parade comes calling

As the millennium dawned, Eisenhut took on his most high profile commission to date. He created 14 different designs for the much heralded charity event the Cow Parade.

The individually decorated plaster cows were spread across Houston and eventually auctioned off for charity. Once again, this endeavor would foreshadow new roads and commissions in the life of Kermit Eisenhut.

When Mickey Mouse calls, Eisenhut said, you can’t take a message. In late 2003, Eisenhut received that call.

His “Cow Artist” superstar status now preceded him and as fate would have it, he had a few pieces hanging in the Houston office of the local Disney AM radio.

Disney was calling with an invitation to paint one of the 75,700 pound, 6-foot-tall “Celebrity Mickey: 75 InsEARations” that would be fanning out across the U.S. Divided into groups, the Mickey’s are on a national tour, and Eisenhut’s Mickey benefits the Texas Children’s Cancer Center. The unveiling is set for August, with the real Mickey here to assist Eisenhut.

Later, all the Mickey’s will be auctioned at Sotheby’s to benefit each artists designated charity. Eisenhut is hopeful someone in the Houston area will purchase his Texas Mickey and donate it to Texas Children’s.

“I thought, what represents Texas? Big summer skies with billowing clouds, a field of bluebonnets, and Texas flag running shorts,” he said. “I was going to have a yellow rose in Mickey’s outstretched hand, but I really want the kids to be able to walk up and shake his hand. It is Mickey Mouse.”

Eisenhut is also busy with an upcoming benefit for PAWS. Pets Are Wonderful Support is a charity that provides emergency boarding for people with life threatening diseases. PAWS also provides dog training in its “Rover Oaks Pet Resort.”

“I painted a beautiful mural for them, you know Radar [the weather dog] from Channel 2, just finished his training there,” Eisenhut noted. An upcoming benefit at Jalapeno’s on Kirby will donate 25 percent of opening night sales to PAWS. Eisenhut will be showing his latest works, pet portraits.

To round out his busy schedule, Eisenhut teaches at Artleague Houston for HIV-positive artists, a project very near and dear to his heart.

“I had a best friend/boyfriend diagnosed with AIDS in 1985. He died in 1987, and that’s when I really started getting involved in galas and fundraisers,” he said.

“Now, to be able to help these individuals deal with their frustrations in real way through their own art is simply amazing. It’s become something I have had to fight for, funding for all the arts, and HIV for that matter is down all over. I’m out there hustling for every dollar I can get.”

The program operates out of the Metropolitan Community Center on West Gray, and Eisenhut said.

Eisenhut laughs when asked what’s next.

“Gosh, I have such a full life. I just love helping other people discover their own passions. Who knows, now that Mickey has called.”

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