

SCREENING YOUR CALLS THE UNIQUE VISION OF SHAWN STUCKY

BY DAMIEN JAMES

Chicago screen printer Shawn Stucky lives the artist's dream: he's poor, he supports himself on the shaky ground of print advertising, he's never without a party, and he's continually creating. OK, maybe it's not all dreamy, but his artistic success in Chicago has its fantastic qualities.

At 29 years old, this Illinois Institute of Art graduate has been commissioned to create a permanent piece for the City of Chicago's riverfront renovation project, has exhibited at Loyola University Museum of Art, and was featured at the Chicago Art Open, Around the Coyote Gallery, and countless other Chicago venues and publications. His screen prints hang in the Iceland recording studio of Sigur Rós and have been seen in galleries from London to Rome to Brussels. He's created art for Ring Road Records in Arkansas and several recording artists across the United States. Stucky, however, has no local representation, nor is he seeking it.

"It would be nice, but I'm not in a hurry," he says.

His casual attitude is as real as his ambition. He spends time online each week looking for potential shows, occasionally finding leads for employment in the arts as well. Two months ago Stucky applied for a position as a screen printing technician at the Royal College of Art in London. "They emailed me back 'NO,'" he laughs. He knew it was a long shot, but that never stops him. He applies for anything he thinks might fit his medium and vision. "I don't want to ever regret missing an opportunity that might have changed my life."

When he's not at his day job or looking for somewhere to show his art, he's in his homemade studio laboring away. His discipline and drive are evident in the well-traveled body of work he has amassed. Stucky's prints are instantly compelling, rich in metaphor and beauty, and wrapped up in the kind of visual mystery that draws people in. They inspire viewers to project their own stories into the art and to create instant personal connections. Stucky's imagery is steeped in the slow probing of his subconscious, in the music he listens to while creating, and in his affection for the people in his life. Some of Stucky's most effective pieces are those that directly address his family and friends; the love he feels for them is eloquent and palpable in his work.

"If you love your work, it will love you back," says Stucky; a philosophy one could apply to more than art.

Stucky began screen printing in 2006, at a one-day crash course at Screwball Press. "I spent months working at the studio, mainly evenings since that was the only time I could go," says Stucky. "But since I practiced in the evening that meant there was hardly ever anyone there... stressful since I didn't have anyone around me to help if I had a problem. At times I would get so angry I'd rip my prints up."

Faith and months of practice paid off. Stucky's first fully realized screen print was the product of a dream about a girl. He awoke with an image in his head, went to the computer, and didn't get up until he had rendered a satisfactory draft of the print in Adobe Photoshop. Stucky then printed a limited edition of *May this be Love*, the title inspired by Jimi Hendrix, a striking piece later turned into a giant vinyl banner by Lollapalooza for its Chicago debut.



A Folded Dream Becomes a Nightmare

Whether Stucky is inspired by a dream or day-to-day experience, each image carries specific, significant emotional or intellectual weight for him. The screen prints begin as multimedia collages, populated by Victorian-era illustrations, or figures evocative of Orthodox icons. The images range from people in repose and angelic floating figures to detailed horse-drawn carriages and odd sea vessels. Stucky manipulates each image in Photoshop, burns them onto silk screens, and then prints them upon previously-screened textured backgrounds and text.

Recently Stucky has changed gears, however, favoring individually hand-burnished pieces that bring him much closer to a painterly mode of printing than what straightforward screen printing is able to do.

"Fundamentally, nothing has changed for me," he says. "I just now find that creating works that are editions of one are more exciting, because I'm able to spend so much time on one piece and try to make it perfect, unlike print making, where I have an edition of 30 very similar pieces. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy print making as well, but there is something special about spending hours on one piece. It's like a child you care for and nurture; eventually it grows into something beautiful."

The new works explore a darker side of the artist and his world, more nightmarish and chaotic than serene and subtle.

Incredibly, Stucky creates his vibrant, emotive pieces through color-blind eyes. It was in the seventh grade, in Wichita, Kansas, that he first realized something was different. "My parents washed my red sweater with my white socks," resulting in socks everyone could see were pink, except for Stucky himself. "Needless to say, I was subjected to lots of ridicule from my fellow students." Still, it took several years and doctors to convince him that he really was color blind.

"Eventually I learned to accept it," he says, "but it still sounds funny to me...an artist that is color blind is like a chef with no taste buds. It's just backwards. I used to think it was a problem and that I wouldn't be taken seriously as a graphic designer, let alone an artist. Now that I think about it, I believe my color blindness gives me a unique perspective. I know I see things differently than most people who view my work. I will always wonder what everyone else sees."

It could be that everyone is seeing the inner visions of Shawn Stucky and dreaming along with him.