

Bruce ALMIGHTY

New Exhibit for one of Lex's Art Legends

By Kate Sprengnether

Bruce Burris and his wife, Robynn Pease, were some of the first people I met when I joined my then-fiancée, Kurt Gohde, in Lexington in late 1998. We lived on North Broadway at the time, in the next block from Bruce & Robynn. Kurt met Bruce a few weeks into his new job as Assistant Professor of Art at Transylvania because he walked past their house to and from work every day. One afternoon, as Kurt tells it, a round man with crazy eyes came barreling out of his house at Kurt and demanded to know if he was the new art faculty at Transy. Since he was, Bruce immediately struck up a conversation with him and invited him out for dinner that weekend. They met at Atomic Café a few days later and, as soon as they were seated, Bruce pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and told Kurt, "I made a list of things to talk to you about. ONE..." It was a lengthy list, detailing improvements needed in Lexington's art scene, and Bruce rattled off each talking point with a fervor and passion that startled, but also greatly intrigued, Kurt. They have been friends and sometime collaborators ever since.

Bruce Burris is one of those omnipresent community figures — an outspoken voice for many different causes. But, how well do any of us actually know Bruce?

Bruce arrived in Lexington in 1994, when his wife, Robynn Pease, began graduate school at UK. They came from San Francisco, where Bruce had lived for about 10 years. He grew up in Wilmington, DE, and lived there, and then in the Philadelphia area.

There are two important aspects to Bruce's childhood, the first that he was consistently exposed to cultural activities by his parents, especially his mother, and encouraged to pursue creative activities. The second is that he attended Quaker schools through the ninth grade.

A basic tenet of the Quaker belief system is the importance of service. Quakers are known for their social activism and strong sense of community. Later, while living in the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco in the late '70s, Bruce experienced a community that flourished, in spite of the fact that it was literally dying from AIDS. Support for the people of the Castro had to come from the Castro, because no one outside of the neighborhood was willing to help. In spite of the sickness and

death all around him, Bruce said that his experience there established his ideal sense of community. These experiences and beliefs — the importance of art and creativity, service, com-



Bruce Burris

munity, and community support — helped shape Bruce into the person he is today.

And who is Bruce?

He is a husband and father; co-founder and co-director (with Crystal Bader) of Latitude Artist Community, an art center for people thought to have disabilities; and founder and director of ELandF Small Projects Accelerator, which provides various supports for intimate, artist driven concepts and performances that explore the idea of public spaces. He is, or has been, involved in various other ventures and community organizations, including a few that come immediately to mind: SEAP (Southern Evolution of Artistic Processes, an artistic partnership with Ben Fryman); PEAL (Project Easy Access Lexington — which enables those thought to have disabilities to advocate for themselves); ConTemp (another artistic partnership, with Kurt Gohde); Radical Bugs (for the establishment of community gardens); and the Eastern State Hospital Cemetery Club (to advocate for the restoration of the cemetery on hospital grounds). This article is not long enough to detail all of the work that Bruce does in the arena of community work and social activism.

Bruce is also an artist, with an upcoming solo show, called *We Will Someday Someday We Will*, at Institute 193 (Jan 14 – Feb 20, 2010). Bruce has had solo shows in

a number of galleries across the US, including: Braunstein/Quay Gallery in San Francisco (who also served as gallery representative for Bruce for a number of years); Urban Institute of Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, MI; Fleisher/Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia; Delaware Center for Contemporary Art in Wilmington, DE; and the Davis Art Center in CA. He has also shown in numerous group exhibits in Lexington. Still, his exhibit at Institute 193 is, in his own words, the second most important thing to happen to him professionally in the past decade (second only to the founding of Latitude).

According to Bruce, this exhibit is the first time that a local gallery has shown an interest in his work and has the ability to provide the support necessary to an artist's growth and success, the major thing that Bruce feels the Lexington art community sorely lacks. In his own experiences, before moving to Lexington, both commercial and non-profit galleries encouraged and nurtured artists in a way not commonly found here. Many years ago, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery put Bruce on a stipend for a year, so that he could concentrate on producing work for a solo exhibit. This was an important experience for him, and now, after living and producing art in Lexington for over 15 years, Bruce feels that he is finally being supported, and therefore encouraged and appreciated, in a similar way in his own community.

Institute 193 was founded by Phillip Jones in the fall 2009 with the stated goal of advancing the careers of regional artists. Institute 193 will provide support in the form of professional presentations, and catalogs with scholarly essays. Phillip has the knowledge, the connections, and perhaps most importantly, the passion to provide support and encouragement to artists and to assist them in finding an audience beyond Kentucky.

According to Bruce, "Institute 193 is a meeting of absolute daring and invention... locally I can compare it to Mecca... Both Teresa and Phil are risking lots personally and both organizations are exquisite in their mission and serve our community in a way that is beyond compare."

Phillip Jones says of Bruce that he "is, to



"Are Ye One with Stoner Creek" 89" x 147": Mixed media on paper



Mountaintop removal protestors

my knowledge, the only contemporary artist dealing with mountaintop removal, rural-Southern community dynamics and the tremendous importance of activism in function of these movements. These issues have traditionally been treated as geographically-specific concerns but are increasingly viewed as essential aspects of the larger 'green movement.' Burriss is working with this material as an interested observer, employing an established aesthetic to further these broadening conversations visually and intellectually."

Bruce and Phillip have worked together on "several different projects over the past few years. Bruce was an early contributor to the JONES SHOP, an experimental shop/installation based in Lexington that traveled to the Edlin Gallery in NYC and will continue to function as a pop-up installation in other cities."

One work that will be included in this exhibit is the Lonely Mountain Community Center bulletin board. The artwork consists of an actual bulletin board covered in flyers, such as one would expect to find in a rural community center. Flyers for basketball clinics and school theatrical production, hang beside flyers promoting temp agencies and pro-coal concerts.

Bruce's intention is that the "piece also acts in effect as a community center — it sponsors actual fishing tournaments, stream clean-ups, and so on. As it is exhibited at various art centers and galleries, people are invited to respond in various ways to the information on the board." During the opening reception on January 14, poet Eric Sutherland will perform a piece related to the content on the bulletin board.

Another piece is 'Are Ye One with Stoner Creek.' Bruce explains the piece, "Stoner Creek is a meandering creek that chugs along through about 98 miles of central Kentucky countryside. At times an idyllic stream — great for bass fishing — and at other times nothing more than a largish drainage ditch, Stoner Creek peters out 2 miles short of being designated as a river

(100 miles is needed for this).

This is a perfect metaphor for whatever you need a metaphor for, in this case, Kentucky, generally."

In a town where mediocrity and homogeneity are too often celebrated; where sports reign on the mainstage; where the arts are shoved into a corner or expected to be safe and traditional, Bruce has struggled to present something unique, challenging even, and to be a new voice.

He is trying to force us, as a community, to take an honest look at who we are — even if we aren't going to like what we find. Today, Bruce acknowledges that there have been many changes in Lexington in the past 15 years, and that there are positive things occurring in the arts here.

They include independent and small ventures, like Institute 193, LOT Gallery, and community-driven events. But overall, Bruce believes that there should be more vigorous, exciting, and innovative arts programs than there are.

He says, "We need to create real supports for our creative risk-takers. ...Vigorous, inquisitive artists need to be nurtured and this is simply not done in Lexington." And yet, he will continue to fight and advocate on our behalf, to build a replica of his ideal community.

Bruce is able to, and he encourages us to, find the extraordinary in the ordinary, and to see hope in any situation. This is a powerful ability. ■

We Will Someday Someday We Will

Institute 193

Jan 14 – Feb 20, 2010

Opening Reception: Thursday, Jan 14, 6pm - 9pm (Also see a performance by local artist, Eric Sutherland, at 7:30pm during the opening reception.)

Gallery Hop: Friday, Feb 19, 5pm - 8pm

Kate Sprengnether is the Director, Tuska Center for Contemporary Art, University of Kentucky



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