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Visual art

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Local artist Ryan Henry Ward paints the town happy

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By [Geoff Carter](#)
August 25, 2008
NWsource staff



GEOFF CARTER

Ryan and Merlin stand outside Fremont's Orange Splot Gallery.

More photos



Have you spotted a Ryan Henry Ward mural in your neighborhood? [Send a photo to us](#), and we'll add it to one of our [neighborhood photo galleries](#).

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As you read these words, a superhero cat has saved a pit bull. A goat has learned a new song on his guitar. And Ryan Henry Ward has probably created another mural.

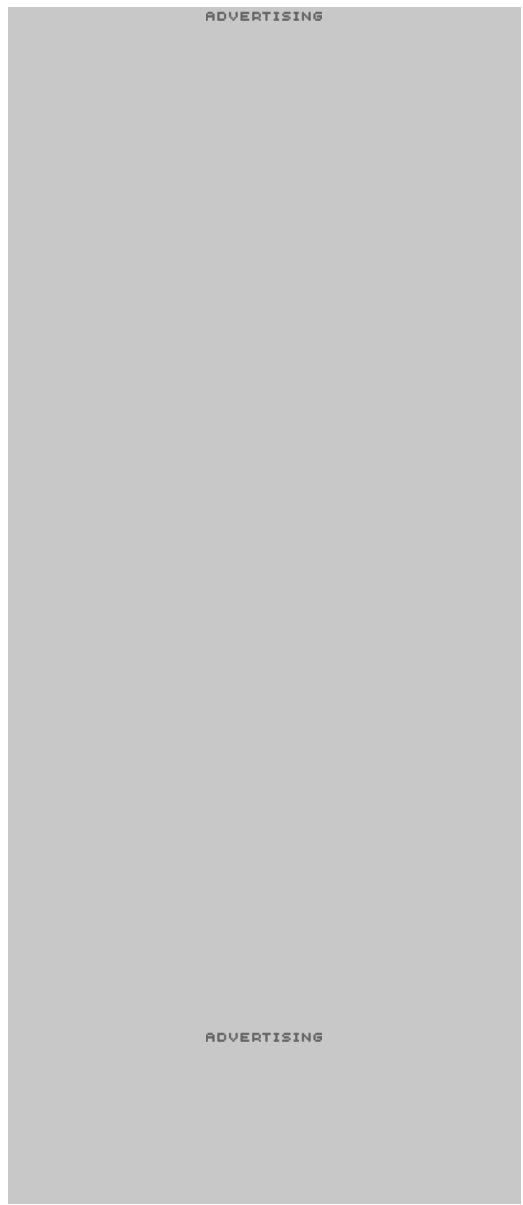
The workaholic local artist is on a self-made mission to create 50 free murals in and around Seattle. He finds blank walls on houses and businesses, gets permission to paint on them and does so, free of charge. You've probably seen his colorful works in Wallingford, Ballard, Fremont, SODO ... I hesitate to make a complete list, because he'll render it obsolete before I finish writing it. He's averaging three murals a week.

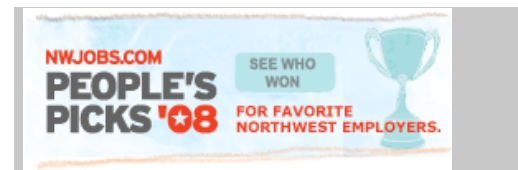
"I have a little bit of OCD," says Ward, relaxing on one of the deep couches at Fremont's [Orange Splot Gallery](#). His "goofy dog" Merlin sits at our feet, tail wagging happily. "I drive around looking at every wall, thinking, 'Is this a highly trafficked wall? Is it worth doing?' I'm a pretty intuitive person, so I try to feel things."

My intuition tells me good things about Ward almost immediately after I shake his hand. I immediately realize that it's not an ego thing for him. Soft-spoken and self-effacing, he simply wants to make ugly walls look good.

"The first place I walked into, the guy was really excited (about the prospect of a mural)," he says. "His wall had some nasty stuff on it at the time and he said OK, as long as there was a picture of his pit bull in the mural. I love dogs and animals, and I love pit bulls, actually. They're sweet dogs, controversial dogs. I like controversial subjects."

His work ethic is rooted in both the sweet and the controversial. Born in Bozeman, Montana and raised in Enumclaw, Ward enjoyed "two fairly rural upbringings." His mother is a horse trainer; his brother runs a successful landscaping business. He takes unabashed joy in animals, in





all things nature.

But he wasn't to stay on the farm. Earning an "interdisciplinary, self-made degree" in "Writing, Art and Storytelling for Children" from Bellingham's Fairhaven College, Ward forged his own path, traveling the world and working with at-risk youth, with AIDS patients and as a care provider for the developmentally disabled.

He worked with his brother for a time, became restless and decided to return to social work. Unfortunately, he suffered a debilitating injury ("I'm almost missing a disc in my back") that left him unable to stand for extended periods of time.

"I don't have insurance, and back surgery is fifty-five thousand bucks," says Ward. "I had these dreams that were unrealistic, so I had to do something large-scale to make them happen."

Luckily for us, that meant turning to art full time. Once you've seen Ryan Henry Ward's art, you can't imagine the world ever having been without it. It's simple in line and in theme (virtually every one of Ward's murals tells a story you can grok from a moving car), and you feel as if you've grown up with it. Even his signature -- a lowercase "henry" inside a white oval -- has a cheering manner about it.

It's little wonder that many of Ward's influences are children's book illustrators -- [Quentin Blake](#) and [Shel Silverstein](#) in particular -- as well as edgy caricaturist [Ralph Steadman](#) and the shaved-head punks who drew on skateboards in his teen years.

"I have a vision for my street work that's a little different than my gallery work," he says. "I wanted it to have a really strong emotional content of compassion and imagination, and tie the two together in a way that is fun for people to look at."

That's what makes Ward's art special: It just plain make you happy. Orange Splot owner Kevin McKouen loves it enough to have purchased one painting for himself: It depicts a moose adrift on a lonely sea in a tiny boat with a single paddle. It's a sadly comic scene, but there's something in the moose's determined manner that touches you. He's even got a soft orange glow about him, as if radiating warmth and courage.

"I bought this in February or March, and I was feeling a lot like the moose at the time," says McKouen. "I'd only been open for half a year and I wasn't sure where the gallery was going or where I was going. I was so glad once I put (Ward's) stuff up. Every time I'm down I look at his stuff and it brings me up."

Two walls of Orange Splot are covered with Ward's art. As strongly as his murals read in passing, so his paintings read on close inspection. The themes are the same -- they all have a "whimsical edginess," as he describes it -- but the lines are deeper and the stories more oblique. Why is the witch clutching that teddy bear? Why is that oval-faced masked bandit (Ward calls him a "Nosferatu") in a showdown with a hanging spider? "There *is* something going on," says Ward

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with a grin. "But you have to fill in what it is."

That seems an apt description of where Ryan Henry Ward is at this point in time. He's got big dreams; he only needs to paint a ladder to reach them. He'd like to lead a documentary film crew to various third-world hotspots, creating murals and working with people in need.

"When I was in Thailand I worked with Burmese refugee monks, teaching them English in exchange for room and board. They're people that I really care about, and I'd like to see the Burmese situation noticed in the news. I'd go into Burma and do a mural, go into Calcutta and do a mural, go into Tijuana and do a border mural ... I do want to be successful as an artist, but I also want to be a ... soldier for the people, I guess. For the people who have the least, and are the most oppressed."

In the meantime, he's devoted to coloring in Seattle's blank spaces, and helping to promote [Orange Splot](#). Its curator has become one of Ward's closest friends.

"He's just a stellar dude," says Ward of McKouen. "He's been a big inspiration to me as well; he traveled the United States living in his Volkswagen van, and I've lived in vehicles. I live in a vehicle now, so I can accomplish what I need to accomplish. I don't have a whole lot of money. I invest all the money I make on art back into more art -- art supplies, canvases.

"And feeding my dog," he adds, giving Merlin an affectionate pat. "And sometimes feeding myself."

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Comments

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- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Salty Squirrel
08/26/2008 | "...soldier for the people,"—beautiful. agoodreed indeed this guy is. Makes ya think that things might just turn out alright. |
| Shaq
08/26/2008 | I wish I could enlarge the photos. I hope he ventures into the Central district |
| Anna
08/26/2008 | Very cool- I saw a children's book illustrated by Ryan not too long ago =)Well done. |
| daniel
08/26/2008 | this is the coolest guy seattle has ever seen. hes a folk hero already. everybody is talking about him. hes giving this city a new hope. |
| susan
08/26/2008 | He's been all over the news. his email is ryan@lucibelle.com . I contacted him to do a mural the other day. he is the kindest person Ive talked to in a long time. |
| seattle city
08/26/2008 | what can we do to thank this generous spirit? |
-

Miescha
08/26/2008

Ryan is a truly amazing and selfless soul. From the moment I met him there was no doubt in my mind of his genuine nature. If there was one thing I had to think of that he could use the most it would be to pay for his back surgery. He is in constant pain... :(

john b
08/26/2008

Big deal hif hes a nice guy. hes an artist and all I care about is if his arts good. I think its better than good. I think hes a genius.

Dr. Jared
08/26/2008

I agree, this guy just blew the art world out of the water. mix picasso with ralph steadman throw in some dr. seuss, take all the street art efforts to climb out of the gutter and youve got a rock star of artists; Ryan Henry Ward

sarah
08/26/2008

is he single? He is so hot, and I'm talking smokin'. If he's not married he better watch out.

Randall
08/26/2008

This was the guy on the news last weekend. I saw him painting a truck. He's the "war no more" artist. I prefer more realistic art myself. It seems his stuff isn't very mature. I wonder if he can paint realistic stuff. I like those historical murals personally.

Jessica
08/26/2008

mmmmmm..... He can live in my house. I'll take care of him. God this guy is so f-ing sexy.

eva
08/26/2008

I've got some ideas of what he could paint. I dont think I can say it on the internet.

Jen
08/26/2008

I met him at a bar in Ballard last week. He had paint all over him and his dog was covered in paint. Sexy? For sure. Hes the sexiest guy I've probally ever met. More than sexy though he's smart and a great listener.

Nick
08/26/2008

Ryan used to live with me. He stops by for dinner and beers every now and then. He's a good man for sure. I'm stoked that he's making it happen. Way to be mang!

Joe King
08/26/2008

Hi. I met Ryan some time ago when he was doing social work. I was homeless and had a bad back and he said that he could use his sexy beard to transfer the bad back from me to him. I said wow that is a really nice thing to do and he just said well would I do the same for him? Well no I wouldnt because I am not as amazing as Ryan. And now he doesn't even mention that he beard-transfered the bad back to him because he doesnt want to take credit for it. well Ryan I know how your beard healed me and you can't keep me from telling people.

Maya
08/26/2008

Wow, if I had a wall, I'd surely have him paint a mural on it! Lovely artwork and great photos of it (and him).

jules
08/26/2008 Ryan Henry Ward is such a beautiful person. My kids want to be like him. Thats all they've been talking about. They wont stop doing art. they're 2 teenage boys and Ive had such a difficult time finding something positive they can get into. They're not the sports type. Now they just want to be like "henry"
they're even signing their middle names in circles above their art.
I wonder if Ryan would be open for giving them a signature.

Franny
08/26/2008 I love the burley mountain man vibe. I want to know how to contact him. His art is so wonderful too!

Mike Janakee
08/26/2008 Everyone who owns this guys canvas work are going to be happy to see the value skyrocket.

Zack
08/26/2008 This is what seattle has needed. The grunge music scene put us on the map. Now it's street art led by the truly great "king henry of the earth party" as he has so humbly called himself.

John Bridger
08/26/2008 why doesnt someone start an "I own a henry blog" I'd like to see the work he's done thats out there in the world.

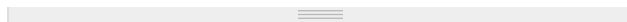
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