

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Searching for Evereman

Tod Hardin · Thursday, April 4th, 2013

Lumberton, North Carolina, is the epitome of small-town America, and like any town with a 225-year history, it carries with it a rather interesting bag of facts and colorful characters.

First established as a trading post for Naval lumber in the mid-18th century, this small southern town would go on to serve as a haven for Virginian free families of color in the 19th century, as the setting for David Lynch's iconic, yet highly bizarre film, *Blue Velvet*, and also as the birthplace of Black Panther activist Afeni Shakur (who also doubles as the mother of Tupac), and of former porn actress Carmen Hart. Certainly plenty to chat about around the dinner table for any small town in this America.

To that list, Lumberton can now proudly claim as a native son one of the most prominent artists associated to the global Free Art Movement – an artistic movement in which artists make art and give it away for free. He goes by the name [Evereman](#) and ten years ago, along with his family, he established the Evereman Project in Atlanta, Georgia – which started as a simple family activity and has grown over the years into an iconic Free Art program, and for the artists into somewhat of a grand social experiment.

Early Years

Let's backtrack a bit. Growing up in Lumberton, Evereman knew he wanted to be an artist. In the late 70's he arrived in Atlanta and began his creative journey as a poet. In 1981 he was looking for a way to get his words in front of more people, so he came up with a simple, yet genius way of doing it. He created stencils of his work and placed them on sidewalks, where they couldn't help but be noticed – and thus the career of a street artist was born.



He soon became aware of the [Billboard Liberation Front](#) in San Francisco, which inspired him to move into the controversial world of billboard alteration art. For him this was an outlet for political and social activism via creativity. Part of his efforts here included an alteration involving a large spear and simulated blood affixed to a Nike billboard on the headquarters of a young company called Turner Broadcasting, which made headlines in Atlanta. We imagine Ted was not too happy. In 1986, Evereman opened the first San Francisco-style burrito joint in Atlanta, which was a popular hangout for artists and musicians.

“We were an underground hit,” he says. “Art shows, bands, cheap, nutritious, good food, and beer.”

He opened a second location in 1989, but in 1991 sold them both in order to apprentice with Atlanta furniture maker Jack Harich, which he did for two and half years.

From that point on, Evereman says he applied himself to raising his son and learning the art of furniture designing and making. His devotion to this craft eventually gave birth to the Evereman concept.

The Wooden Robot

About a decade ago he was working on a figurative wood piece that would include a robotic looking face carved out of walnut. Evereman liked the drawing he made for the face and decided to hang it on a wall in his workshop. One day, his son, who was 11 at the time, came to him seeking something that he could cut into a stencil. After looking around the shop they decided that the drawing used to create the face was perfect.

“It just seemed to fit,” says Evereman. “We started painting the face on small scraps of wood and putting them out on the street. It became a regular family Sunday outing for me, my wife and son. We would visit different parts of Atlanta, have breakfast and then walk around the neighborhood and put the faces out for anybody to take. From there I got carried away, I suppose. It was just a fun thing to do ... it’s still a fun thing to do.”

Going Global

And fun it is for people all over the world.

Thousands of Evereman pieces have been given away in Atlanta over the past decade, and in the past couple of years Evereman has gone to a national – even global level.

“I’ve received photos of Evereman pieces from all corners of the world,” says the artist. “Detroit, San Francisco, the Burning Man Festival, San Juan, the Pyramids at Giza, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the streets of Berlin – just to name a few. And soon they’ll be on the streets of Japan. Evereman is a global message and I really enjoy seeing the photos that are sent in.”



Power in Simplicity

Without question, the Evereman Project has connected with people in a powerful way. But why is that? What is the message and what inspired it?

Evereman says he believes that it’s the simplicity that makes it special. The simple face is stamped on one side of a wood square block and the other side is imprinted with the date and “4U” which indicates that his art is free and for the lucky person finding it.

“The lack of complexity in the design is appealing and the name was inspired by Woody Guthrie,” Evereman continues. “I’m a big fan of his music and his hope for the common man. He was the quintessential everyman, so I knew that was the name. Once we had it, my son said ‘what if we changed that Y to an E?’ And from there it just made sense. The design looked complete.”

Sara Frey, a founding organizer of the [Free Art Friday](#) program in Detroit, Michigan, which recently brought Evereman in for a visit and a series of workshops, couldn’t agree more.

“The Evereman symbol is cool,” says Frey. “Some see it as a robot. Some see it as other things. There are these graphic elements that make it easy on the eyes and if you look closely you’ll see that the letter E is built into the design, on the left and right sides, which complements the E’s that you see in the written name. It’s interesting and non-exclusive. It’s for everyone.”

Becoming a Social Experiment

Evereman says that although it started out innocently as just something to do for fun, a deeper meaning has come from the Evereman Project over time.

He says: “It’s been a very organic growth. Evereman is art for all and we’re all in it together. As Guthrie sang ‘There’s a better world a-coming’. Evereman is about sharing and giving, as opposed to just taking. Evereman is about co-operation, as opposed to competition. I believe this easily recognizable image can help people feel less alone in a society that is often overwhelming. I know it makes people feel good, which is the idea. I want a positive thing out in the world and I think we have achieved that.”

Chris Bruno is an artist based in Atlanta and a member of the Free Art movement there. His

Evereman story of discovery shows that Evereman's goals are being met ... and exceeded.

"My heart literally started racing and I reached out and took the Evereman tile off of the door," said Bruno, referring to a day he was walking by a food truck in Atlanta. "I was so excited to find a piece of Evereman art that was just for me. That sparked something inside of me. I found myself looking around more and paying attention to my surroundings as I walked. The thought of finding another Evereman piece made me interact with my environment and observe more life around me. I was also inspired to give someone else the feeling that I had just experienced. There are few things more exciting than finding a piece of handmade art. You never know when or where you'll see a piece of free art and I think that makes life in this city a little bit better."

Stories like Bruno's aren't uncommon. Because of them, for the past five years, Evereman has been thinking of the Evereman Project as a kind of social experiment.

"I like seeing how people come across this thing in their environment," he says. "I'm trying to encourage people to think beyond the idea of 'hey, I found this thing for me.' It's about how this thing – this art – made me feel good and wanting to do the same for somebody else. The idea of trying to pass that good feeling along to others is what I want to see."

Community Action

One way that he passes it on at a larger scale is through what he calls his Production Parties.

"I invite the community into my workshop, usually on a Saturday, and we'll make as many as 750 pieces of Evereman art in an afternoon. The idea is to not just be a taker, but also a maker and a giver."



Bruno participated in a Production Party back in December, and he certainly indicates that there is indeed both a special sense of community surrounding the Evereman Project and a great admiration for the artist himself.

"The vibe surrounding the Production Party was amazing," says Bruno. "Everyone shared in the art-making process. It felt great to be involved with a project that we all knew was going to bring joy and excitement to those who found the artwork. Evereman himself is such a kind, caring person too. He hovered around making art himself, but his primary concern was the guests in his home. He took time to talk with each of us and made sure we felt appreciated for helping. I consider it an honor to know him and be involved with the making and sharing of his art. He truly is a one-of-a-kind soul."

Free Art Fridays

Gary Sondike certainly agrees with Bruno on his assessment of Evereman himself. Sondike is a creative executive in Detroit, and he first met the artist a couple years ago through friends in Atlanta. The concept of what Evereman was doing served as inspiration for Sondike to join Sara Frey in founding Free Art Fridays Detroit.

"He's sort of this cool eclectic guy," said Sondike. "Pretty chill ... easy going. He fits the bill of the classic eclectic artist. You kind of easily connect with him. His wife is a doctor and she and their son came with him to Detroit and were equally involved in making art and interacting with our group. It was truly genuine ... a real family and community experience in many ways."

Evereman says it's all about connecting with others. "We as humans want to express ourselves. For me it's about communicating with people. It's about connecting with more of them, more deeply ... and it's about doing so through creativity."

He also says that the Project is also about getting original art into the hands of people that normally wouldn't have it.

"Part of the appeal is that this opens original art up to all," he says. "So many people feel as though they can't have original art, because it's viewed as unaffordable and therefore inaccessible. I've

been in more homes than I'd like to say where there is no original art, which really strikes me. My house is full of art, but realizing that this isn't true for all provides more motivation for getting more free art in the streets."

Do No Harm

One challenge in doing so was to find a way in which he could do it without destroying the surfaces he places Evereman pieces on. Street art is often controversial, as it is typically uncommissioned art placed on property that is not that of the artist and/or where no permission is given. While he says he supports street artists of all kinds, practicing a "leave no trace behind" philosophy has become an important element of the Evereman Project.

"I don't have any problem with street artists that practice their art on surfaces that are not theirs," he says. "There is a code that we all follow, and common sense typically leads to artists leaving their mark in spaces that are improved by it. As a young artist I started the same way. There is always a contingent of artists putting their artwork on the street without permission. That's something that has been with human society since the beginning."

At first Evereman was gluing his wood faces to surfaces, but he started noticing glue spots in the places where they had been. "It was important for me to change to that 'leave no trace behind' practice. I didn't like seeing this detritus, so a solution was needed."

Which he has found in two ways that seem to fit with the overall theme of "simplicity" for all things Evereman. Each piece is now secured by using good old fashioned gravity or with a small magnet that is implanted into the back of each wood square. Problem solved.

Supporting the Artist

One problem that hasn't been solved yet is that free art is free for everybody except the artist. There are considerable expenses involved for any artist providing his work for free – both in time and with cost of materials.

"The balance is one I struggle with," he says with a laugh. "I do have some credit card debt right now directly related to the Evereman Project. I never really thought about the money part for years, but it is to the point where I'm putting a lot of these pieces out at a considerable cost. One thing that has changed in the last two years is that I've forced to put out smaller pieces. The ones I put out for free are typically 4" x 4" squares or smaller. I'm reserving any larger pieces for sales, since there is more cost and time required with those."

He says he loves giving away his art and can't imagine ever stopping that, but he also hopes that more people will start buying the work he and others produce once they are introduced to it from any one of the free art programs happening around the world.

What's next for Evereman?

One goal is to start doing larger sculptural installations. He recently had two big temporary pieces in Detroit but he ultimately hopes to have some permanent commissioned pieces.

While "Evereman" is his most recognized moniker, you'll also see him popping around Atlanta as Muleskinner MacQueen – leading the Muleskinner MacQueen Trio, an old-time Americana band and ode to Woody Guthrie and others.



And some might be surprised at his latest musical pursuit. "I'm very interested in electronic music. I want to know more about it and I've set up a small studio to start experimenting with it. I'm interested in melding these old sounds with new technologies and seeing how people react to it."

Interaction is Everything

In the end, it all comes back to the concept of a grand social experiment and his desire to find creative ways to interact and communicate with others.

"Through this long journey I continue to meet so many amazing people – likeminded folks – and I

love that and I'd like to figure out a way to continue that around the world."

We certainly hope that he does. There may indeed be a "Better World That's a-Coming." If there is, we have a feeling that Evereman will play a role in making it happen for everyone.

To learn more about the artist known as Evereman, please visit www.evereman.com or his Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Evereman>.

Images, from top to bottom:

Evereman at a recent gallery show in Detroit. Photo: Sal Rodriguez.

Evereman's billboard alteration makes headlines.

Evereman in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Production party at Evereman's workshop.

The Muleskinner MacQueen Trio.

This entry was posted on Thursday, April 4th, 2013 at 3:41 am and is filed under [Visual Art](#)

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