

tedmeyer

scarred for life

by Jonathan Jerald
photos by Debora Deibler



paintings were very much focused on me, on my inner narrative and what was going on with me physically. I had severe bone pain and I felt very trapped by my situation. I was always in pain—so I depicted that.

"I studied graphics but I had never painted. Then one Christmas a girlfriend gave me a paint set and said, 'you keep telling me you're an artist, paint something.'" This was a little bit before my surgeries. I was 32. I had my joints replaced and around the same time they came up with a treatment that alleviated some of the side effects of the illness and almost immediately, because of the sudden lack of pain, the first paintings I did after the operation were full bodies with skin on them that showed social interaction. They no longer showed a sole person locked in a shape.

"So I started on a series of these multiple figures and this has been an ongoing series since about 1992. They're a lot more colorful, they're healthy-looking, and they're interacting with each other and the environment as opposed to just being an isolated figure. The healthier I got, the more colorful and happy the paintings became and I really wasn't doing artwork about illness any more.

It's a shallow life that doesn't give a person a few scars

Garrison Keillor

Ted Meyer creates exuberant, colorful paintings of human figures in vaguely orgiastic groups—but it is his exploration of pain and its aftermath that may be his most intriguing work. A chance encounter with a woman in a wheelchair inspired him to explore body issues by making prints of scars caused by serious injury or illness and subsequent surgery. A youth spent in continuous, unrelieved pain also informs a body of work that is appealing both for its formal graphic qualities and the visceral reaction provoked by being confronted with evidence of a disturbing wound. He inks the scars and does direct transfer prints and displays them with a photo of the subject and a short text that describes the nature of the injury or operation that created the scar. As soon as he started showing this work he knew he had touched a nerve in our body-image conscious society because of the surprising number of people who approached him with their

own scar stories.

When his prints were shown at the National Museum of Health and Medicine at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., a *New York Times* story on his work generated an outpouring of personal tales from wounded survivors of various trauma around the world, among them the victim of a machete attack in Somalia and a Californian who had been bitten by a shark while surfing in Australia. Most gratifying to Meyer, however, was the reaction of the veterans of the war in Iraq who were recuperating at Walter Reed and who thanked him for helping them to see their scars as something other than the stigma of combat.

Meyer lives in a spacious loft in the main building at The Brewery near downtown L.A. He shares the space with several cats, one of which, oddly yet appropriately, is a partial amputee. Most of his well-structured paintings have the color and exuberance of Matisse's *Dance*. His early works, however, are quite different. They show monochromatic, almost skeletal figures that seem trapped in coffin-like enclosures that force them

to bend and contort to fit in the narrow space. We asked Meyer to explain how and why his work had evolved and how he came to explore the nature of scars: "I was born with Gaucher's disease. It's an enzyme deficiency that caused a lot of joint pain and bone deterioration. I spent a lot of time in the hospital when I was a child and I did a lot of my early art work there. As a result I think I've always been very comfortable doing work based on body form, especially imperfect body form and showing pain and struggle. So early on my



Then I moved to New York from Los Angeles and I went to an art opening and I see this girl in a wheelchair roll into the gallery. I was immediately taken with her—not just because she was very pretty but her whole attitude of who-gives-a-shit-that-I'm-in-a-wheelchair and she's an actress and she's still dancing with a dance company even though she's still in a wheelchair. Eventually we would have a lot of conversations about doing artwork. She kept saying 'You still have to do artwork about illness and mobility issues.'

"There was one night when we were sitting in her house and she pulled out a little bag of clips and these were the clips that had been in her back after her operation. She had had a rod put in after her back was broken and after a while they were uncomfortable so they took them out. So I'm holding these clips that had been inside her body for some

time and we're having this whole conversation and I'm thinking, 'Well, I really have nothing left to say about my illness, maybe I should start doing work about other people's illnesses.' That's how the whole scar thing started. I did a print of her back, showed it at the first art walk after I moved to the Brewery and people immediately started coming up to me and saying, 'Here, let me show you MY scar and let me tell you my story.' So by the second art walk I had about seven scars up and then the next one I had about fifteen and now I'm up to fifty or so.

"The project has developed more than just the visual aspect of it to sort of like the Studs Terkel documentary process. People kept asking for more and more about it. They wanted to know where on the body a particular scar was, so I added diagrams. They wanted to know how did the person get injured, so I went back

and got everybody's story. Then they wanted to see the people, so I started photographing the people with the ink on them. So now for each person I have a whole history. It's pretty amazing. The last time I showed them, which was down at the 18th Street Art Complex, there was a woman who came in with stage four brain cancer, took off her hat and pointed her head at me with this big scar and asked, 'Can we do this now? I don't know how much longer I have to live?' So she showed up the next day and we printed her head.

"What's interesting is, my paintings are pretty and people buy them for their house. But these are the ones (the scar prints) to which everyone relates. Sometimes

they start crying because it's the same scar of someone they knew who died. I try not to make them too literal. A long time ago I was working for an after-school program in San Diego and we hired this woman to come in and she did Japanese fish prints and I keep thinking of those prints because I didn't want to just take photographs of scars. To a certain extent, I wanted to take the 'ick' factor out of it so that when you first look at them they are studies in color and line and then you might get in closer and discover, 'oh, this is a tracheotomy' or 'this is a suicide attempt.' So they start off having artistic, visual meaning and then once you get into them they have a whole different narrative."

Ted Meyer's Scarred For Life series will be included in a group show at the Pasadena Armory (North) opening October 12th and shown at the Muscone Center in San Francisco in March of 2008. You can also see some of his work online at artyourworld.com or visit his studio during the Brewery Artwalk (2020 N. Main, Studio 236.

Jonathan Jerald has written for Vanity Fair and California Magazine. He has produced more than a dozen documentaries for The History Channel, including the award-winning History of LSD.



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