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Preston Hollow's mad artist: Brad Ellis is taking over the art world, one painting at a time



(Photo by Danny Fulgencio)

Brad Ellis has a knack for the unconventional.

After 18 years in advertising for American Airlines, the Preston Hollow neighbor traded his corporate office for a paint-splattered studio in 1997. Ellis has devoted the past 20 years to carving a career as a full-time artist, an ambition many won't attempt because of its financial instability and competitive nature.

“I really had a calling, and I hate to be that dramatic about it,” he says. “I wanted to make art. I knew I’d never be able to realize my true potential if I didn’t dedicate my full time to it.”

Ellis has garnered attention throughout the country for his abstract work. His paintings are displayed in seven galleries from coast to coast, and one even was selected for Art in Embassies. Adopted by former President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the U.S. Department of State program hosts exhibitions at embassies and consulates across the world. Ellis’ “Dash #2” is on display in Kampala, Uganda for the next two years.

Ellis is content with his accomplishments, he says, but he’s only scratched the surface of his capabilities.

Kenneth Craighead has watched Ellis’ work metamorphose since it first was displayed at Craighead Green Gallery, which he co-owns, 22 years ago. He constantly pushes his own boundaries and experiments with new techniques, Craighead says.

Looking at Ellis’ pieces, it’s hard to imagine he first studied traditional art at the University of Tulsa. The canvasses — layered with newsprint, fabric, wax and paint — are inundated with bold colors and geometric patterns.

“I like paintings that have a lot of junk in the trunk, you know?” he says.

The layers and vibrant hues are what makes his creations so captivating, Craighead says.

The whimsical designs seem arbitrary, but Ellis’ paintings are usually conceptual and revolve around themes like language or dance. It’s his version of writing fiction, he says, because he’s crafting an image that didn’t exist before.

“This is thinking about ideas ... and then translating that into something concrete, something visual, something that wasn’t there before,” he says.

All of his work is created with the encaustic method, a technique that dates back to ancient Greece and uses heated, pigmented wax instead of paint. It dries instantly while still allowing Ellis to easily manipulate the wax’s consistency and texture.

It’s a tedious process, but he’s all about the details. Ellis spends hours at night in his Del Roy Drive garage-turned-studio. The sketchpads scattered in boxes, heating tools on the table and paint splashed onto the walls give the vibe of a mad scientist’s lab, but it’s where each painting is perfected around-the-clock. Ellis is constantly thinking about his latest project, even when he’s not working, he says.

“He is dedicated beyond belief,” Craighead says. “For any artist to do that, you have to believe in yourself and believe in your gallery.”

Ellis chalks up his success to a combination of determination and luck. The criticism and financial burden can be crushing at first, he says, but it doesn't outweigh the benefits.

"It's one of those things, you do it because you have to do it," he says. "There's something missing if I'm not painting."



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