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by Scout Finch

"Art has a tendency to take the form of what you're willing to do."

Steve Briscoe is a painter/musician living in Oakland, California. He and his wife, artist Lynn Beldner, bought their own home in mid-1998, one that, as a crack house, had been the scourge of the neighborhood for many years. Most area residents applauded the arrival of their new neighbors, although every now and then some lost soul will come straggling up the porch steps, hoping to score--only to be confused by the freshly mown lawn and barking dog in the front window.

I recently sat down with Steve and my tape recorder, and we watched the clouds, waited for the rain to fall, and talked for about an hour. We talked about his day job, about the art that he makes, and about Charm House, the pop band he fronts.

You have two careers going on simultaneously: painter and singer. Do you want to talk more about the band or the visual art?

Steve Briscoe: Whatever makes sense to you and your readers.

Well then, let's talk about the art world. As I read your bio, I noticed that you'll be turning 40 this year.

SB: Thanks, thanks for putting that in the record. Yeah. It's true.

I only mention it because I'm kind of looking forward to 40. I often feel like my 20s are kind of blah, like something exciting is supposed to happen, but mostly I'm just sort of waiting for life to settle down and begin.

SB: I'm not sure that ever changes, though. You know, in a way, I'm working at the same job I had when I was

in college. It's more advanced than what I was doing then

You're working at the Oakland (California) Museum, doing installations?

SB: Yeah. Yeah, I'm getting into other aspects of that. I'm doing more cabinetry building and mount-making and project management, things like that.

Do you freelance with different museums, or are you just at the Oakland Museum?

SB: I do freelance some, but Oakland is my main museum.

Can you explain a little bit about what cabinetry making is?

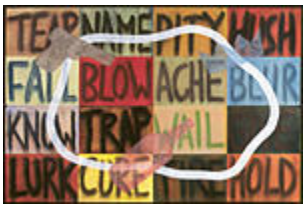
SB: Well, in any kind of interactive exhibit where you might have a video monitor, or a computer screen--that's what I'm working on now--it needs to be put in a box so that people won't mess with it. I'm doing this walnut-trimmed box with Formica. It's stuff I haven't really done that much of, so I'm always learning new things. That's what nice about that kind of a job.

It's interesting to think that somebody makes those. That's the kind of thing that I think people assume is just there. But here it is: you're the guy that makes that stuff.

SB: Well, a lot of times we farm it out to some cabinet shop or something. Other times we just make it in house.

Do the museums reuse cabinetry? Or do they just use it once and disassemble it?

SB: The thing I'm [currently] making is for the permanent display. So it's more of a [long-term] project. A lot of times, if we make something for a temporary exhibit, we'd just, you know, just take something and paint it, most of the time. Make it out of particle board



Do you use a lot of tiger-striped design when you paint them? I think that's a really underused motif. You know, tiger stripes, leopard spots, the whole jungle cat look.

SB: You'll have to start your own museum.

Are you working full time now?

SB: It's going to be almost full time this year. It depends on the show schedules, how much work there is. But there's a big show coming up, a travelling show, coming into Southern California first, then up here. I'm going to work on that, and it'll probably take most of the year.

What about your own art? What's next?

SB: No shows in the works right now. I just had the one at Traywick (Berkeley, CA) Gallery in the fall. Generally she (owner/director Katrina Traywick) keeps my work up in the back galleries, so it's always visible in a way. There's kind of vague plans for this and that. At the moment I'm going to wait until something comes along. I haven't really been working on [organizing a new show].

Is it like setting up shows for the band, where you sort of call around and say, hey?

SB: Actually, it's not too much different. Although the lead time is longer. You need to have the work available for them to see 6 months in advance. And then they kind of look at it and say, "Well, in 6 months, you'll be ready Ôcause you'llhave worked for six months." (laughs)

Do they want you to have a certain number of pieces to display?

SB: Well, there's a certain amount of real estate you have to take up at a gallery. So it depends on the space of the gallery. And, they like [you to have] enough to pick from. That sort of thing.

When I first e-mailed you to ask if we could do this interview, you joked, "Is it okay if I engage in shameless self-promotion?" And I thought, "that's a great idea," but I'd never really considered it. You know, I didn't really envision interviewing somebody who had, for lack of a better way to put it, a product to push. You know what I mean?

SB: Yeah, but well, everybody's got a product.

Do you notice the difference between artistic endeavor and business endeavor - does that affect you?

SB: Yeah, they're definitely the kind of things that affect each other in ways that they shouldn't, in the perfect world. But it's pretty hard not to I mean, it's still a [process] where you're producing something that's an artistic effort and then trying to get people to look at it, and that takes marketing, and that takesexposure. And those things don't just come for nothing, or by accident. You've got to put it out there and say "look at this!"

Do you find yourself changing what you do with your art? Do you ever paint something and go, "Oh, everybody's going to hate this, I'd better change it"?

SB: Certainly, art is a business, and you know, the more things that happen around it, the better, the more reviews the better. But no, I think you know, when you've finished a painting, whether you're still going to own it after the show. You can't worry about it. Oddly, it's a fatalistic sort of endeavor. The music is the same way -- it's like, my music is very pop-ish, it's not anything adventurous or like John Cage or anything. You know? But at the same time, as much as I strive for nice simple pop songs, they don't usually sound that way, they don't come out as easy listening. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

SB: They kind of, I don't know, there's something that's kind of odd about them. The same thing applies to the paintings -- even if you wanted to make "nice" things, your failure to do that is what keeps it from becoming [boring]. In art or in music, you're always trying to live up to your role models. The things that you've looked at are the things that you internalize and you regurgitate on the canvas, or you try to re-write the perfect pop song. Andthe failure is what makes it your own. And if you can kind of embrace that, then your marketing is just, "Well, this is the stuff I make." And, you know, "It's supposed to be fucked up."

In comparing music and art, you made a comment about owning the painting after the show, after the run, but with doing a painting as opposed to writing a song -

SB: Very different.

Yeah! Because you actually give up ownership of the piece. If somebody buys the painting, it's gone. You might take a picture of it or somethingbut with a song, you can put a record out, anybody can own it, but you can still sit down with the guitar and play the song.

SB: Right. Music is more like printmaking, where you make limited editions of [your work]. I was thinking about that this morning. I was thinking that making up songs with a band is sort of like coming into a studio with a bunch of artists, and I've got a big shape on a piece of paper, and they've all got their crayons out, and I just throw the big piece of paper in there. And then we all attack it with our crayons and finish it. You know? It never sounds the same as when you [started it]. You don't have complete control when you're working on songs with a band.

So you feel like working with a band involves, in some way, giving up the ownership of the work before it ever becomes public?

SB: Yeah. You have the idea, but they flesh out the parts. Unless you really are going to keep control of all that - then you have to pay them. And I don't want to do that! So, you know, it's a different kind of process altogether.

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Is it difficult, when someone wants to buy a painting? Is it hard for you to let it go? I mean, aside from the fact that you kind of realize, "All right! I can pay the rent this month!"


SB: Yeah, it's really more rent-oriented. Which is not to make it sound like a totally commercial endeavor, but it is a form of validation when people buy [work]. And then, usually they buy it because they really like it. I mean, I'm not a household name, so there's no investment issues in the way. A lot of art does not necessarily go up in value. Very little art goes up in value, actually. So

Thank god you've got the rock band to fall back on!

SB: Mmm, great. I've got 2 money-sucking operations.

If only you could moonlight as a philosopher.

SB: That's right. Sometimes I miss things, or I regret selling pieces because they were the ones thatyou know, when you have a set of pieces, you'll have your favorites andyou'll know which ones are the best ones. The other ones are good, but they're maybe not your favorites. It's not that they're not necessarily your best work, but they failed somehow in your mind, and you moved on for a variety of reasons, rather then beat them to death. And the pieces that are really good, oftentimes other people will somehow sense that you like them and buy them.

Really?

SB: Unless you take steps in advance and say, "Well, I don't want to sell this one." Or you don't let it out of the studio at all. A lot of times it means not even showing it to anybody, since as soon as you do, they're going to want to buy it, or the dealer's going to want to talk you out of it. Money is a bit motivator too, you know. Because it is about the rent.

Yeah. It's a weird kind of catch-22 career to be in. You make these things because you have something that

you want to do, some need to create, and then you either have to give it up so that you can do more

SB: Well, there are people making work that can't be sold. And that's a noble operation, definitely. I mean, I have always liked objects, and objects are always meant to be sold in a way.

Do you ever work with found objects? More tangible, three-dimensional art?

SB: I used to use found objects a lot. I have a whole body of work thatthis piece is mine. (Points to a strange, bowling pin shaped item sitting on the edge of the table.) That's just a doo-dad.

What made you decide not to do this kind of work anymore?

SB: My whole [problem] with sculpture was that it started to back up on me in an unpleasant manner. Suddenly I just had a whole lot of extra pieces that weren't gonna show and weren't gonna sell and [that I] didn't want to storeI threw away a lot of stuff. I switched to drawing after about '93, I guess. I was starting to work more at the museum, and I just had less time to make art, and I needed to be able toÑnot finish an idea in one sitting or anything but at least be able to

Stick it behind the couch when you weren't working on it?

SB: At least be able to see progress. Before that I did fairly process-oriented things. I'd make the sculpture, you know, assemble it out of found objects, and then I'd take photographs of it, and I would make a canvas. The canvas would be a printed photograph of the object, and these would be diptychs that would go together. Those were labor-intensive. I did it for like 3 or 4 years, that kind of stuff. And I just have not been able to find that much energy to do those kinds of pieces. Art has a tendency to take the form of what you're willing to do.

The path of least resistance?

SB: Well, I don't mean that, but if you have 15 minutes to make art, it's going to look like art you made in 15 minutes. And if you're willing to spend 6 months on a piece, it will look like you spent six months on it. It does not necessarily mean it will be better, it just means it can be more complicated, it can be more elaborate. And I don't intend to spend that long on each idea. I wanted something more immediate that I could get out and get in and see results and move on. And so the graphic work has been nice that way.

Let's talk about the actual subject matter of the work that you're doing. In the majority of things that I've seen, you focus on words. What's that all about?

SB: There was a point in art history, very contemporary art history, maybe late 1980s or even the early '90s, in which word art was very popular, very trendy. I never thought I could do that for some reason. I never really liked it, and I never thought of it as something I would pursue. And here I am doing it. A couple of events sort of lead me to itI'm reticent to say what those are. But

they needed direct expression, those kinds of things. And when I started to [put] down the things that I was feeling, it just came out as words. I liked the way they looked and I liked the way the writing was kind of a calligraphic sort of mark that could be abstract and it could [still have] meaning. It had a visual kind of a resonance too.

I liked the pieces with blank faces, images with no meaning to them, and yet the background bursting with lists of names

SB: Those were the kind of depersonalized sort of silhouette that[represented] the Everyman. [I did] lots of them with names. I mean, I started off with just name-calling, and kind of infantile name-calling, the more infantile the better. I reserve the right to return to that at any moment.

So you find strength in the words as concepts, as words with meanings, as opposed to simply combinations of shapes, of letterforms?

SB: Yeah. I'm definitely more oriented toward the meanings of the words. I mean, thethe last series was sort of set off by the Columbine shooting stuff. And, I know it's probably not very obvious from the Ğ or maybe it is Ğ from the paintings themselves but the choice of words came from that kind of thing. And they were mostly verbs, action verbs. Transitive verbs, as they say

Your work is in series, then? First names, and now verbs?

SB: [I] kind of moved out from [names] to titles. Like "king of the hill" or "top of the heap" kind of stuff. [I was] just kind of hunting and gathering those kind of expressions in the language. When I hear a phrase, I'm often set off on that kind of association. I categorize things. The silhouette series came earlier, before the more recent things, like the crayon and the bottle and the dice, things like that.

Do you ever get criticism from people that see, for instance, a painting that has only a grid full of words? Do people say, "What the hell is that? That's just a bunch of damned words."

SB: I had a scroll in the show, it was a 23 foot scroll, just four letter verbs, just little blocks, all on a continuous piece of paper running from the ceiling down to the floor, and people really liked that piece. A lot of people said that was the best piece in the show. Umnobody pulled out their checkbook for it, but still It actually is a pretty stunning piece, if I do say so myself.

You're allowed.

SB: I've had plenty of criticism over my [style]. Plenty of "Oh, my kid could do that," or "What's so special about that?" And you know, that's probably the least informed kind of criticism that anybody can level at your art. You learn not to really take it very seriously: "Yeah, but your kid is not going to make this." Or more coarsely, "Okay, well, let's see 'em." You know, that kind of thing. I've got plenty of responses to that. It doesn't take anything into

account, it just dismisses automatically. I've dismissed work in my time. But you've got to give somebody credit for just getting his shit together to actually get it onto the paper.

Well, that's what I was going to say, it feels like a lot of people, when they criticize, I almost think that it's a bitterness that they didn't do it first: "I could have done that," but inside they're thinking, "Damn, why didn't I think of that?"

SB: Well, maybe. But not on a conscious level. I can't imagine most of them are very jealous of being an artist. They just don't want it to seem too easy.

Artists have to be tortured.

SB: Sometimes when it looks easy, it really gets their goat. People resent art and I don't really know why. I don't know why there's that kind of lowbrow resentment and highbrow arrogance that seems to be in our culture.

I'm pretty bitter that I didn't think of that. (Points to a large metal basket on the floor in the corner, filled with old metal crank handles.)

SB: That's mine as well. It's not really a finished piece, in a way.

Is that just a basket of cranks? Or is itare they fastened down? I mean, is that set in place?

SB: No, they're just [piled in] there. The meat-grinder handles. For a while I went down to the As-Is shop down in East Oakland and I would take the meat-grinder handles from all the meat-grinders. (laughs) It's not full. It's close, but But that was going to be part of something else, and I didn't ever finish the piece. Lynn likes that thing, so we keep it, but it weighs a ton. Like all art: weighs a ton.

All good art.

SB: (Sighs.) All good art just weighs heavily.

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