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Carving out a place for himself

Goldstein makes his mark in Chicago by fusing artistic vision and carpentry skill

By Amelia Benner



Jeffrey Goldstein (left) and friend Ed Paschke at the famed artist's Chicago studio. (Photo by Bill Bengtson)

stairways.

Although Jeffrey Goldstein '80 is now proud to call himself both an artist and a craftsman, it's a role he long resisted.

A fourth-generation carpenter who majored in art at Illinois Wesleyan, he loaded up his 1967 Dodge Dart after graduation and moved to Chicago to launch his art career.

"I swore up to that point that being a carpenter was something I would never do," Jeffrey says. "I looked at swinging a hammer as a temporary setback based on a genetic family defect."

Realizing he couldn't pay his bills on art alone, Jeffrey launched Carpentry-Artworks in Chicago. He began with small repair jobs but soon found himself in demand to work on larger, more creative projects like cabinets, bookcases and

"Around this time I realized that if I split the deck of cards that life had dealt me, one half would be holding my interest and skills in art and the other half of the deck would hold my interest and skills in carpentry and woodworking," he says. "Shuffle the deck back together and the result is that I have something unique to offer others."

Jeffrey's fusion of art and carpentry gained the admiration of members of the Chicago Imagists, a group of artists associated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Jeffrey had admired the Imagists since his first exposure to them as a student working in Wesleyan's art gallery.

"At one point I was told to hang a collection of work by a group of Chicago-based artists," he recalls. "The color and imagery of the work was funky, edgy and contemporary with these wonderful, immaculate surfaces. I thought, 'Wow, now this is painting!' I felt the work's cutting edge gave me permission to push my work further and into a bolder direction."

Jeffrey brought that admiration full circle when he began doing his artistic brand of carpentry work for several of the Chicago Imagists in their homes and studios. The most famous of those artists, Ed Paschke, soon became a close friend. In 2004, at Jeffrey's urging, Paschke even gave a well-attended lecture at Illinois Wesleyan.

"A favorite memory with Ed was sitting alongside of him while I helped him work on one of his paintings while listening to William Burroughs tapes," Jeffrey says. "It was always a learning experience to listen to the decision-making process Paschke used in making a painting. It's much like a construction builder's approach."

For Jeffrey, the "crossroads event" of his own artistic journey happened in 2002, when he received an award from the City of Chicago's Public Artworks Project. Jeffrey's project is located at Gallery 37, a city-owned building used mainly for the promotion of education in the arts. Employing a technique called marquetry — a fusion of carpentry and design — Jeffrey designed, fabricated and installed a marquee for the Storefront Theatre located on the gallery's first floor.

To create the marquee images, Jeffrey used small, solid pieces of different colored woods. "It took a year to hand-cut and fit 4,500 pieces of wood, as well as complete one oil painting for the project," which he finished in 2003.



Goldstein created a marquee for the Storefront Theatre at Gallery 37 in Chicago.

A special honor, Jeffrey says, was collaborating on the project with five members of the Chicago Imagists, who provided imagery for the marquee's main column, which Jeffrey converted to marquetry. Jeffrey describes the collaboration as a "cosmic alignment ... All this stems out of that exposure to one art show at IWU."

In 2005, following Paschke's death, Jeffrey showed his appreciation for the artist by arranging and curating a tribute show that featured the works of 45 artists, including Jeff Koons, Victor Skrebneski and many of the Chicago Imagists.

Today, he is still working on carpentry projects — including a remodel of an older house in Rogers Park that includes custom trim and cabinet work — and creating art.

Ultimately, Jeffrey reflects, it's the relationships he's forged through his projects that he finds most meaningful. His clients have represented all walks of life: policemen, doctors, and lawyers as well as "a midget race car builder, a Golden Gloves boxer, a boiler inventor, a scientist, bar owners and Tokyo Rose."

Asked what advice he might offer current Wesleyan art majors, Jeffrey reflects on the good old-fashioned work ethic that is part of his genes. "The artists who have 'made it' share one common denominator: they are very hard-working. To succeed, be prepared to work hard, keep passion high and expectations low. You'll be a happier person for it."