

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dobrzynski, Judith, H., "Taking the Ordinary and Finding it Beautiful," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1999

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Taking the Ordinary and Finding the Beautiful; Paper Napkins Turn Into Flowers as a Career Unfolds in Accessible Art

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI
Correction Appended

Inspiration, like opportunity, often comes cloaked in strange guises. For Jim Hodges, a Brooklyn artist, it came in a life-changing way because a cashier at a Korean deli did what cashiers do hundreds of thousands of times every day in New York.

Each time Mr. Hodges bought coffee, she would hand him far more paper napkins than he needed. Reluctant to waste them, Mr. Hodges would stash them in his backpack. One day he was feeling particularly deflated about his art, which he was working on between duties for the Dannheisser Foundation, the owner of a collection of contemporary art that he cared for in exchange for a basement studio. (The collection was donated to the Museum of Modern Art in 1996.)

He even thought about giving up art altogether. While he mused, he drew a flower on a spare napkin. It became a habit: as he sipped coffee each day, he tried out various designs and styles and, on the flip side, he sometimes wrote notes. "They were honest records of my days," he recalled recently.

Thus was born "Diary of Flowers," an array of 565 crumpled napkins that he pinned to a gallery wall in early 1994, the centerpiece of his first solo exhibition. Critics liked it. Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* called the drawings "as engaging when taken one at a time as when viewed as a single field of blooms."

Mr. Hodges now makes art full time. Nearly a dozen museums, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, own his works, and he has had solo shows at half a dozen others, including one on view through April 11 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. His pieces sell for \$5,500 to \$40,000 to influential collectors like Peter Norton, the California software entrepreneur and philanthropist, and his wife, Eileen, who own eight of his works.

"The work is very provocative because it's beautiful, very emotionally expressive, and it comes this close to being sentimental but it never crosses the line," said Susan Cahn, the Nortons' curator.

Last year, the Nortons -- who are known for supporting political, often difficult art -- commissioned Mr. Hodges to make their "Christmas project," the multiple artworks they send to some 3,000 people each year. (Among the Nortons' previous choice of artists for the yearly project is Kara Walker, who retells African-American history in sexually explicit, violent terms in black paper silhouettes.)

Yet far from being difficult, Mr. Hodges's work has won fans by being colorful, visually alluring,

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even beautiful, curators say. (More than one curator has placed it in group shows about beauty.) As with "Diary of Flowers," Mr. Hodges takes ordinary materials and makes something else. Mirrors become mosaics; artificial flower petals are transformed into curtains; silver chains are woven into gossamer spider webs. For the Nortons, Mr. Hodges designed an azure blanket, an image of water in wool, with the inscription "If there had been a pool it would have reflected us."

His work, critics have said, is about memory, loss, lost time, nostalgia, relationships, aging, personal growth. "Jim is a romantic character, a humanist," said Glenn McMillan of the CRG Gallery, his SoHo dealer. "There is no sarcasm or cynicism in his work."

So, while much contemporary art seems inaccessible to the uninitiated, it does not seem at all odd that the easygoing Mr. Hodges aims to make art that is easy to read. In a cheery yet emotive voice, he recalls coming to New York to attend graduate art school at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and "not speaking the language" despite a fine arts degree from Fort Wright College in Spokane, Wash.

He had grown up in Spokane, one of six children, encouraged before kindergarten by his parents and grandmother to be creative. "They gave me a box of colored pencils and said 'draw,' and I enjoyed it," he said. "My mom always said, 'The details you put in were different from the other kids,' and my kindergarten teacher said the same thing. So it was at a very young age that I knew what I wanted to be."

But there was no art museum in Spokane, no repository of Old Masters or Impressionists or even American art, let alone the kind of aggressive, provocative contemporary art dominant in SoHo and the East Village in 1983, the year he arrived in New York. It shocked him.

Explaining what drives him now, at 41, Mr. Hodges said, "When I make art, I think about its ability to connect with others and its ability to change or affect others, to bring them into the process, to bring easy access to art."

It seems to work. "His show here was really popular, superpopular," said Dana Self, a curator at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Mo., where Mr. Hodges was an artist in residence last year. "Not many artists work in an emotionally accessible way, but he does. His works are intellectually accessible, too."

Learning a Lesson: 'I Can Do That'

Mr. Hodges, evidently a populist, would go a step further. Dressed in a faded Cezanne-blue shirt and baggy gray camouflage pants, he sat at a worktable in his tidy white studio in an old brick industrial building in north Williamsburg that has been converted to artists' lofts, and said: "I like that people say, 'I can do that.' That's part of the message -- yes, you can do that."

Before and after his "Diary of Flowers" episode, Mr. Hodges himself had to learn that lesson several times. After completing graduate school, while he worked at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in SoHo, he initially painted -- unhappily. Realizing that he was a bad painter, he abandoned his brushes and concentrated on charcoal drawings. Then he started experimenting.

"I felt beauty was very important to me," he said, "so I made as many ugly things as I could -- not

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because I set out to, but rather to figure out what beauty was. It seemed so abstract."

Lacking money, "I started using lots of materials -- paper clips, tar paper, water, dirt," he said. The AIDS epidemic was under way, and Mr. Hodges, as a gay man, had many afflicted friends. For one, a florist, he made some roses of tar paper and Scotch tape and exhibited them in a group show. But he discovered that people were put off by them, deterred by the materials.

"I realized I had to rethink the material because I want my work to be understood," Mr. Hodges said. Now he twists many materials with everyday cultural associations into something new without losing the identity of the original. "The materials of art are all around us, and it's the artist's job to expose them," he said.

His ideas, he said, come from everywhere. "Music, poetry, books, movies, friends, walking, the subway," he said. "I'll walk down the street and notice something. Ideas find me. I don't look. The ideas I wake up with at 4:30 A.M. are the best. Then I figure out how to get the idea out of me in the most understandable way. That's where the job part comes in. I marry a material to an idea so that it has a meaning. I think of it as braiding hair."

Mr. Hodges said he tried to keep things simple: "The shortest distance is what I go for, without much in between."

The process is slow. "I have something in my head for a year, maybe more before I start work on it," he said. He makes no preliminary sketches, though he does draw to help conceptualize his thoughts. The evidence is apparent in his studio, which is just over the threshold from the living quarters he shares with his partner. Pinned to the wall are a spherical rendering filled with stars and a rectangle covered with aluminum foil squares; more drawings lie on the table.

As an idea jells, he starts working. "When I start a piece, I have no idea where I'm going," he said. "I have an idea, but no notion of what it's going to be like in the end. I have parameters in terms of how big, what materials I'll use. The outcome is a complete surprise."

When a Chain Became a Web

A roll of silver chain, for example, sat in his apartment for a year before he decided to turn it into webs, after visits to an armor exhibition in Ireland and to a concert where a web made of rope was part of the set. "It suggested time and the sense of absence; it seemed literary," he said. "And the entire space could become the art." Mr. Hodges has since made at least 100 webs, one a 23-foot wall of interconnecting webs.

The webs led him to curtains, which he has made from both scarves and silk petals. "My intentions were very simple: I was taking a material and exposing it," he said of the way he deconstructs artificial flowers, irons the pieces and sews them together, end to end.

With the cascades of flowers, which have been bought by several museums, Mr. Hodges had too big a hit. Several were commissioned works, and he feared he would have to start filling orders. "My work was just reaching a broad audience, but I didn't want to be the flower artist," he said. He felt trapped.

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Broken Mirrors And a Vision

Mirrors were his escape. The inspiration came on a plane ride to Los Angeles, as he wrote in his journal about the need to break from his history. "I wanted to be brand-new, and I had a vision of a mirror and a picture of a mirror breaking came into my head," he said. "And I felt incredible freedom."

The idea germinated for a year, however, before he figured out how best to shatter the mirrors. It involved a trick he learned when he handled art for the gallery and the foundation, specifically, covering glass with tape to prevent any further damage if it breaks during an art shipment. With his mirrors, tape cushions the breakage and allows Mr. Hodges to reposition stray pieces easily. But the patterns are random. "The only plan is to break them," he said. "If I try to control it, it adds a level of imposing design on a natural occurrence -- it doesn't add to the work."

From breaking mirrors, Mr. Hodges has progressed into mirror mosaics, perhaps predictably. "I started thinking of putting the things I break back together, and how to cut it up," he said.

Such talk is typical of Mr. Hodges. When he discusses the way he approaches a new material, it is as if he is wrestling it to the ground. When he knows how to use something new, he will say things like "Then the material was mine." More than once he used the word "freedom" to describe what he felt after artistic breakthroughs.

Mr. Hodges also revels, he said, in "the physical sensation" of making art. Nowadays he even sees incidents like his flower curtain crisis as "an opportunity for change" that he welcomed. "I didn't come all this way to stop here," he said. Then he quoted Walt Whitman: "The strongest and the sweetest song yet remains to be sung," and added: "He was about 70 when he wrote that."

Artist at Work

Articles in this series examine the creative process. The first subject was the painter Lisa Yuskavage.