

Greg Dunn: A Story All in One Face, *Metroland*, March 2014

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Everywhere Greg Dunn looks, he finds the bones of stories. As a building renovator with Albany Artisans, he's no stranger to aged wood, buckling drywall, leaky pipes and old machines. Dunn sees these objects as holders of memory, and he can't stand to throw them away. When he describes the thrill of uncovering a piece of wood that's been "entombed" for ages, you'd think he was talking about rescuing a person.

Dunn, a visual artist, loves giving new life to old things and making room for stories to unfold. He's painted scenes on toilet seats and refrigerator doors, built canvases out of wood lath, tacked roofing nails into cityscapes, and turned desk fans into airplane propellers. The result? A body of work that speaks to urban decay and delight, celebrating the simultaneity of experience.



Greg Dunn/photograph by John Glenn

Dunn is an expert at putting things (and people) together. He says that he learned to repair cars without ever reading an instruction manual—the pieces just fit. As a child, Dunn struggled academically due to dyslexia. In his mind's eye, letters and numbers fused together, traded places, or faced the wrong way. But this seeming handicap gave him the ability to understand the world in terms of shapes, to work backward from context to detail. Nowadays, it helps him to create dazzling "landscape portraits," paintings that combine human faces with infrastructural elements—buses, buildings, arches, roads, slabs of concrete. "I try to make it a story all in one face, so it's not necessarily just me. It could be many different things. I think other people can relate to it: 'Oh, I saw that guy, man. That homeless guy down there.'"

Dunn says that he's always liked cities, and likens their energy to that of "an invisible ocean" touched by the breeze. Though he was raised in rural Altamont, he spent much of his youth skateboarding in downtown Albany. Immersed in graffiti culture and the local punk scene, Dunn became fascinated by the art of freedom, associating it with boldness of character. He explains this period of his life in messy terms: skating on monuments, being chased by police, stumbling into artistic habits. Though Dunn's work still has a graffiti aesthetic, its creator is no longer motivated by egotism. "I don't know if doing

graffiti and tagging your name everywhere is such a good thing. . . . I think it's better to take the graffiti and put it on a canvas so people can take it home with them, hang it on their walls. That way they can remember certain moments in their lives. It's like capturing time, in a way."

This positive, outward focus has attracted the attention of South End resident Scott Davidson, owner of Bonobo Cafe and Gallery on Madison Avenue. Davidson displays Dunn's work and has helped him build a following of coffee connoisseurs and fellow artists. "I love having him around," Davidson says. "He's a positive guy, a good influence, which is important to me regarding any person. He's just got a great heart." Bonobo's backyard is home to one of Dunn's ongoing projects, a weathered collection of sculptures and paintings playfully called "Dunnsville." It looks like a mix between a metallurgy workshop, an attic, and an English garden. Trimmed with snow in later winter, the backyard had a beautiful, urban stillness. Dunn expects to finish the project within the next few months.

John Glenn, a filmmaker and musician with the indie band Stellar Young, has been intrigued with Dunn's work since it appeared at Bonobo three years ago. After completing a film minor at SUNY Oneonta, Glenn participated in several short film projects, one of which aired on WMHT's *TvFILM*. But he wanted to find a challenging subject with enough depth to support a documentary. Almost inevitably, Glenn found himself exploring Dunn's life and artistic methods on camera. The resulting documentary, titled "Thanks for Looking: Behind the Art of WellDunn," screened March 7 at Bonobo to a crowd of about 40 people. It features working footage, original music, skits, and interviews with Dunn's parents, friends and fans. The film gives viewers a real sense of an artist interacting with his environment. One can't help but be awed by the irrepressible nature of Dunn's personal creativity.

In typical storyteller fashion, Greg Dunn keeps noticing signs that he's in the right place at the right time. He's currently working on illustrations for a children's book written by Brendan Schweda. "One day I was at work and I found a page from a children's book, *Mother Goose*, in a wall," Dunn says. "The very next morning, my friend from MoMA wrote to ask if I'd be interested in illustrating a children's book. He says he'll represent the finished product to his employer and other big museums in the Northeast. The book is 26 pages long and happens to be about a little truck named Max.

"Weirdly enough," Dunn says, "Maxwell is my middle name."

--Carson Frame