

art

White Out

Gay artist selected for Portland Art Museum's inaugural Contemporary Northwest Art Awards

by Barbara Ann Hart

Seattle gay artist Jeffrey Mitchell has something to celebrate: He is one of five Pacific Northwest artists selected for Portland Art Museum's inaugural Contemporary Northwest Art Awards. Together with artists Dan Attoe, Cat Clifford, Whiting Tennis and Marie Watt, he will be recognized in a series of special events that commence with the exhibit's opening this month.

Anonymous arts professionals nominated 259 artists in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Mitchell is excited and honored that he was one of 34 finalists who received studio visits from the show's curator, Jennifer A. Gately. From her visits, five artists were selected. The award is based on quality, innovation, skill and relevance to community or global issues.

It's been an interesting journey for Mitchell, who, by his own admission, grew up in a cultural vacuum. His dad worked for Boeing on military contracts, and the family traveled across the Northwest and Midwest to be near the bases. In these small towns of 30,000 to 40,000, there were no art museums.

Mitchell's grandmother cultivated his inner artistic voice. Through her, he learned to sew, knit and crochet. He liked to work with his hands and would make furniture. "Kinda crafty," as he calls it. Being a gay kid, and living in the towns he lived in, shaped his imagination. If he

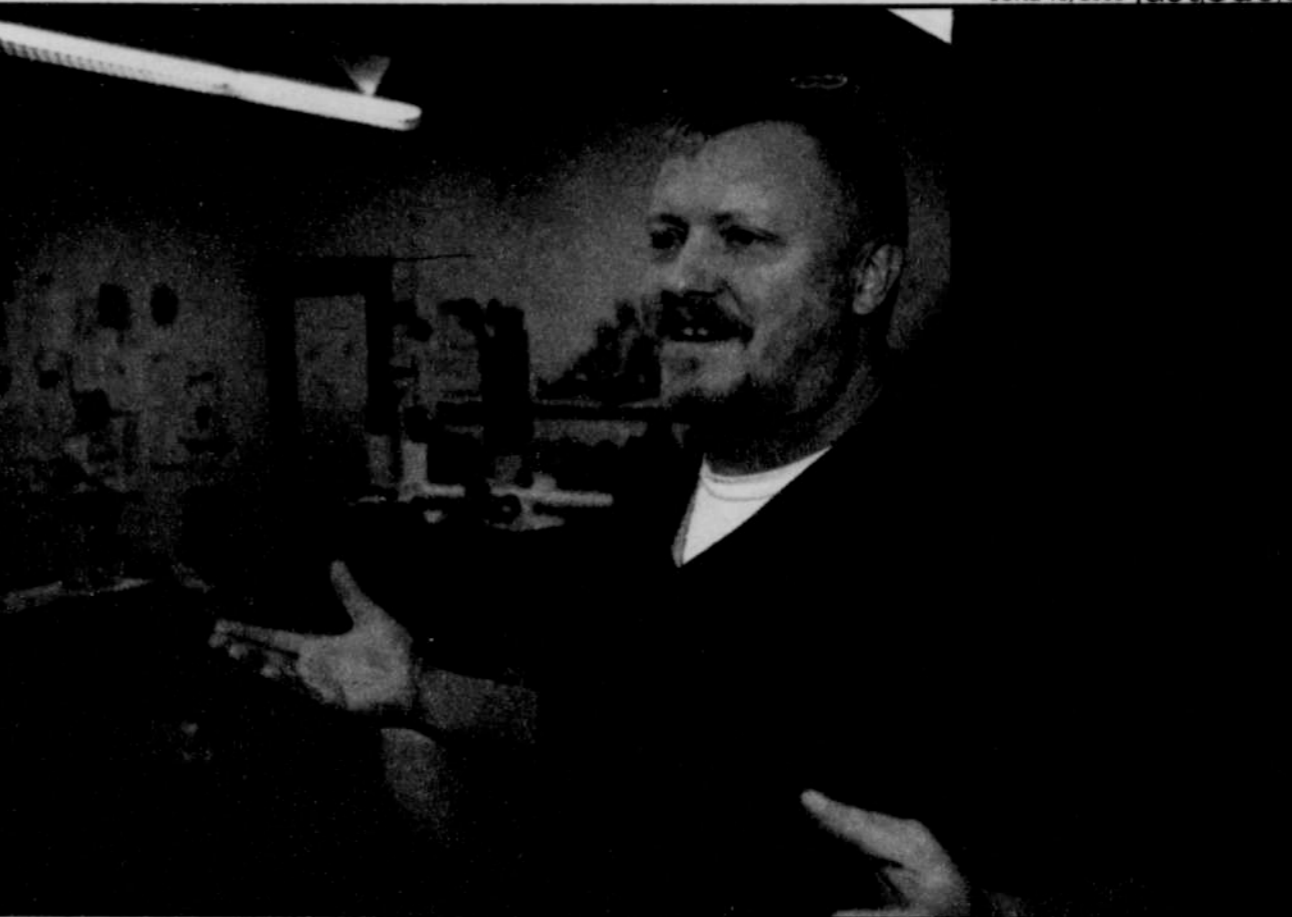
hadn't gone to art school, Mitchell admits he would have been a crafter.

If he were to put a label on the style of work he produces, it would be "decorative" and "folk art," with a good dose of personal experiences. His work does have a crafty appearance, an homage to his childhood apprenticeship with his grandmother, and covers three major disciplines: printmaking, illustration and ceramics. All are very detailed, with animal and plant motifs, a reflection of his Scandinavian heritage. Mitchell frequently incorporates the word "HELLO" into his pieces, which is a societal way of communicating, sending a message for a response.

Then there are his elephants. His proclivity for elephants come from somewhere, but he is not sure. Babar, the fictional character created by Jean de Brunhoff, comes to his mind. Dumbo, the floppy-eared Disney character, is a favorite. Whatever the influence, most of his pieces have an elephant or two.

Mitchell works in white. When asked why white, he recalled a visit to Switzerland when he was an 18-year-old student in Rome. Robert Ryman had a show there. All his paintings were white.

"There must have been 40 paintings exactly the same size," Mitchell recalls. "They were square. They were hung high. It was like heaven. Some people would say, 'Oh my God, what



Although now considered an established artist, Jeffrey Mitchell still works a couple of nights a week in a Seattle restaurant as a waiter.

is this?' But I thought it was sublime. I think that is one reason I use white. I think my own reason might be that I am kind of fair; it is somewhat self-portraiture."


Being gay, and coming out when he was 28 years old, has affected his process. He was "deep asleep," as he remembers, perhaps because he was closeted for so long. His art is a reflection on his sexuality and his desire to liberate himself on his uptightness about sex that is associated with his Catholic upbringing. Some of the images are visualizations he has while having sex. There are holes to represent anuses, and penises are occasionally embedded and camouflaged in his intricate pieces.

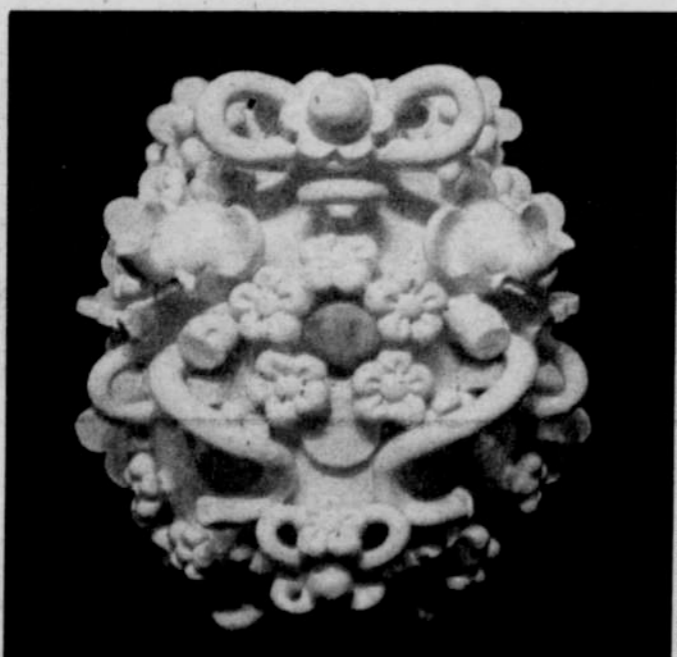
Because the family moved a lot when he was young, Mitchell was never confronted by school bullies like most other gay kids. But the subject still makes him uncomfortable. Mitchell recently completed a residency at a private school in Knoxville, Tenn. He recalls: "The kids were great, but I still get tense when fourth-grade boys beat up on each other in a friendly way and call each other 'faggot.' I still get that ugh, crunchy feeling. In high school, it's all about fitting in, and to be labeled a faggot was awful. People sometimes called me a sissy. But no one knew I was gay."

Everyone in his immediate family of four brothers and four sisters is accepting and loving. He has a niece who just came out. A sister is very religious and would prefer he not be gay. "She thinks," Mitchell admits, "it's curable or some-

thing, or a deficiency. Isn't it funny? It is so sick, that you wouldn't want everyone to be fully themselves, like the wonderfulness of that."

Mitchell has always worked other jobs. He's done manual labor, taught art at a university in Seattle and taught English in Japan. Although now considered an established artist, Mitchell still works a couple of nights a week in a Seattle restaurant as a waiter. The owner was a student of his, and Mitchell has watched the restaurant become very successful and high end. Some of his work is in the restaurant, and he has sold pieces there.

He has gotten over the anger of someone who is making it as an artist with what Mitchell believes are inferior skills. "It doesn't get you anywhere," he says. 



A Robert Ryman exhibit in Switzerland inspired Jeffrey Mitchell to work in white.

JEFFREY MITCHELL, PICKLE JAR (ELEPHANT AND BOWL), 2007. GLAZED EARTHENWARE, 14 X 12 X 7 INCHES. IMAGE COURTESY JAMES HARRIS GALLERY, SEATTLE.



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