Me and You

By Leo Rhodes

Memories come
Memories go
Some memories need fixing
Other memories fix me
During the hard and rough times
The memories we made together
Is what gets me through

'There's room for everything'

BY COLE MERKEL
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Jonathan Cornelison is not a typical street artist. He seamlessly blurs the boundaries between traditional art, psychedelic imagery, painting, drawing, graffiti and, when he can, teaching. At 26 years old, Jonathan has already produced an impressive body of work with a unique style that incorporates the natural environment, the supernatural and the universal realities of human existence: death, life, love.

"I'd like to break down all the barriers," says Jonathan. "I want to blend street art and fine art into one thing to a point where people don't even realize what they're looking at. Instead of everything being categorized, I think art should be free-flowing. It doesn't matter to me; I'll look at fine masters, then I'll look at graffiti art, then psychedelic art, and to me it's all art. There's room for everything."

In terms of producing media, Jonathan tends to be pragmatic based on what's available in his situation. "I love painting, but I realized it all comes back to drawing," he says. "If you have a firm foundation in drawing, you've got good hand control and your motor skills get so fine, to the point where you're going to be able to become a good painter, too. I draw so much because it's always there and it's always convenient and I can do it anywhere. I can't really do that with paint, I can't soak my brushes on the street."

Looking closely at Jonathan's art is like stepping into the space of a dream – sometimes a nightmare: a giant lizard subtly changes color across a sprawling canvas of desert, serving as the focal point of light in the night sky; a reaper points its bony finger, jagged as a stalactite toward an excavated grave; an illuminati eye cries blood from the top of a floating pyramid. The subtle spaces Jonathan creates allow the viewer to take a glimpse into a deeper part of him he doesn't always let onto.

"When I'm drawing on the street, people can look me in the eye and they know exactly who I am, and they get to look at my feelings and all these things inside of me," says Jonathan. "If people take the time to flip through an artist's whole portfolio then they've kind of just gotten a taste of that person's soul. That's why I think street art is so important, because it's really accessible to everybody and it breaks down the barrier between artist and viewer."

Jonathan's favorite artists are M.C. Escher and Salvador Dali and he shares a birthday with Vincent Van Gogh. Certainly surrealism is an inspiration in his work. Jonathan extracts his other major inspiration from the natural environment of his home state of Arizona, primarily the desert around Flagstaff. Cliffs, cacti and the constellations of Arizona's night sky are common themes in his work.

One of Jonathan's dreams is to become an art teacher to share the gift of self-expression that he has cultivated in order to inspire a new generation. "The deepest reason I do it is because I love kids," he says, alluding to his kind, compassionate core that might sometimes be obstructed by viewing the universe of his work.

Last winter, Jonathan took a break from Portland, where he had been a Street Roots vendor since the early summer, to try his shot at being an artist in Tempe, the uproarious hometown of the University of Arizona. On the city's downtown strip, he found himself constantly protecting his art from being stepped on by drunken fraternity members and scantily clad sorority sisters. He returned to Portland for a breath of fresh air.

"People in Arizona don't appreciate art half as much as the people I've met in Oregon," says Jonathan. "It's a difference of culture, a difference of opinion and a difference of historical ties that shape each place. Arizona is in turmoil right now with SB 1070 and Sheriff Joe Arpaio. They're basically trying to divide and conquer and turn everyone against each other right now. They're stirring the pot and it doesn't help when it's 120 degrees; it's literally boiling in Arizona."

When selling Street Roots, Jonathan often draws with his newspapers displayed. "I'll try to make a concrete connection between the fact that art is important and so is being knowledgeable about your community. I'll tell them to support the arts with a small donation or support their local paper." He says that selling Street Roots coupled with creating art has helped him become less shy. He typically sells at the downtown Rite Aid and on Alberta Street during Last Thursdays.

The distillation of Jonathan's art philosophy is similar to the self-transformation he has undergone in his moves between Arizona and Portland: "You have to destroy things to create things sometimes, and that can be healthy," he says. "I don't think art should be stagnant ever. As an artist, I don't think you should get comfortable ever. You should always push the envelope and always try to do some strange stuff because the only constant we have that's guaranteed is change."

PHOTO BY COLE MERKEL

VENDOR PROFILE
Jonathan Cornelison

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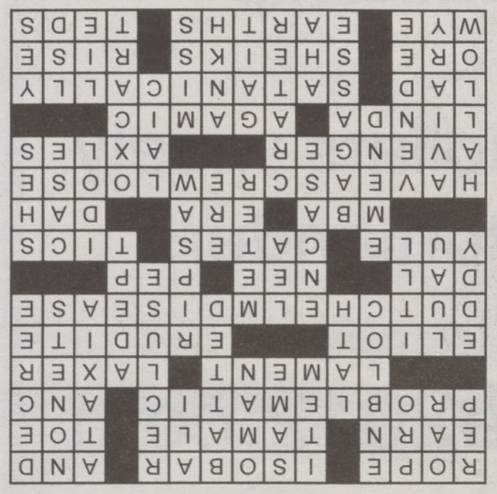
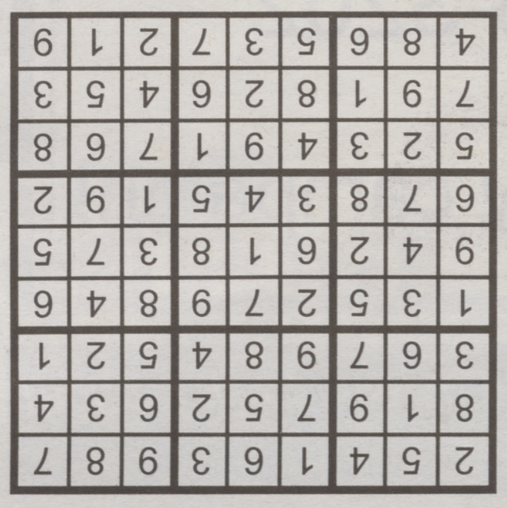
Answers to puzzles on page 15





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CORRECTIONS

Please report any errors to our managing editor, Joanne Zuhl, at 503-228-5657, or write to joanne@streetroots.org

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