

American soul singer Erykah Badu may be currently using his portrait of her for her MySpace profile pic, but Steven Lopez, a 33-year-old former Eugenean artist, is modest about it. On his blog he notes, “A little bit of the cat has jumped out of the bag.” Indeed, that little bit of the cat certainly caught the attention of *EW*. Lopez studied art at LCC 1995-98 and then at UO from 1998-2000, finally moving back to his native Los Angeles County in 2003. During his stint in Eugene, he painted numerous murals throughout the city using the pen name “Frustr8,” some of which remain to this day. What makes Lopez’s murals stand out — like his homage to Japanese wood-block prints on the side of the Rest EZ Mattress Factory on West 7th — is a deft handling of spray-paint and a bold color palette. Lopez is making a name for himself in L.A. by continuing to paint murals, posting time-lapse videos of himself painting soul singers (like Badu) to his website and live painting at various jazz clubs and events. With his solo show coming up in September at the Fenario Gallery, *EW* chatted with Lopez on the artistic life, a new mural he’s painting in Eugene with local youth and the difference between public art and graffiti.



What about growing up as a Latino in L.A. influenced the choices you’ve made as an artist?

I was kind of reclusive. In some ways I still am. So not wanting to be in a popular circle gave me a third perspective. It always made me think of stories or come up with scenarios on why things were the way they were. I think a lot of it has to do with the chemistry my mother and father had. They had the elements of artistry and both had fiery personalities. My father is a skilled carpenter; he could see something and build something from scratch, from the foundation to a finished house. My mom was really into crafts and hobbies so she let her mind wander and get lost in her spare time. The work ethic was there and being able to use my hands.

Latin American art styles seem to crop up in your work. Have you studied those art forms?

When I look back at it, I do see myself referencing that kind of style. Sometimes I wonder if that’s my own culture coming through me subconsciously. I don’t look at Mayan or Incan art and say I want to replicate it. What I see in my work is that I’m being very bold and stylizing a lot of the faces and the human body. Which, in essence, is what they did a lot. The Mayan and Aztecs and Incans were stylistic with their art and, you know, maybe the apple doesn’t fall that far from the tree.

There is also a strong mark of urban art and graffiti in your work, where the colors are bold and the imagery is expressive.

If anything has been an influence, it has been graffiti art. Which helps me — or may hinder me, I don’t know yet — but it has helped me get my color palette and to show an explosion of a story — an explosion of equilibrium or an explosion of thought or emotion. But lately, in the past four years, I’ve calmed myself down both mentally and emotionally, as well as in my art, because in years before I was shortcoming myself for letting my own animosity or my own personal faults get in the way of my work. When I say “my work,” I’m really talking about my relationships with people. I’m coming full circle in realizing that my artwork is just a reflection of my relationships with those around me.

Like being an artist is about how you live, and that comes through in your art?

Yeah! Whereas before I thought my artwork was the ends to my means; it’s like that was what it was about. It wasn’t about how I reacted towards people, you know, like you should treat me as an artist. I was totally full of myself.

Right now you’re making videos of yourself painting portraits of soul and R&B female vocalists (such as Badu, Sade and Chaka Khan) using time-lapse photography. What has been the reception you’ve received with these videos?

Recently I put these movies onto my iPhone, and it’s real interesting to see the power of video, the power of “this is what’s done,” and to show it to people on the spot. Rather than say “Go to my website” or “Here’s my card,” now the reaction is so much stronger, so immediate. We’re such a visual society, we don’t believe something until we see it. Once they see it, they’re like, “Who put this together?” And you go “Me,” and they’re all like “Oh my God! You’re doing all this stuff?” It makes people believers real quick.

How has the artistic life been treating you?

Last year I finally moved in as a freelance artist for snowboard and fashion companies, doing illustrations and paintings. It’s not the success story of “rags to riches,” but it’s not like I’m completely struggling. After my gallery show in September [at Fenario], I’ll be working with the Lane County Positive Youth Development Program Services’ Youth Action Board, directing a mural with a team of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 at a site

Opposite page:	This page:
(Clockwise from top)	(Top)
Hate on me 36" x 48" canvas acrylic	I focus I want this 28" x 22" canvas acrylic
Stay 36" x 48" canvas acrylic	(Bottom)
Amerikahn promise 36" x 48" canvas acrylic	One had a gift from beyond. The other had brought the funk. 48" x 30" canvas acrylic

