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Robert Tomlinson's studio in Independence is packed with a "playground" of materials to create art, from globes to sticks, dominos to Scrabble letters.

Through the eyes of an artist

Tomlinson finds potential art in everything from words to sticks

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

INDEPENDENCE — Robert Tomlinson's art studio in Independence is stacked with spray-painted branches, twigs, gold-painted sunglasses, dominos and dice.

Globes of various styles line the shelves way above eye level. Books lay on shelves, some with bindings and covers missing. Old metal toolboxes, some rusty, are filled with shells, feathers, eggs, pinecones, seeds, wood or a lock of hair.

On the side of his home, shells spray-painted black dry before they can be brought back into the studio and added to the collection of supplies there.

Tomlinson, a contemporary artist, said he doesn't have any one specific thing that inspires him, but rather allows the world around him to create art.

"The big thing in life as an artist and as a human being is paying attention," Tomlinson, 63, said. "Driving down the highway, I look at a lot of backs of trucks, mark making."

Those marks, at some point, become an alphabet.

"We know in the compilation of letters, we make words that make sense that make meaning, but what accounts for the meaning in an abstract work of art?" he pondered. "Those are the

questions I ask instead of 'what is inspiration.' It's more specific and directed."

Poetry and language play a large part in Tomlinson's path as an artist, with works in progress such as the "loaf poem," which will be words or phrases painted on slices of a loaf of bread, which has been spray-painted gold.

His most recent exhibition at the Dan and Gail Cannon Gallery of Art at Western Oregon University included a variety of works centered on exploring words and art together. One piece, "The Silver Leaf Chronicles," is ink and spray paint on leaves collected from his garden. Each silver leaf contains a two-word poem.

Everything in Tomlinson's studio is well organized. A jar of Scrabble tiles of various shapes and sizes here, a line of legs — perhaps collected from tossed-aside toys. What will those be used for?

"There's a conversation that occurs between the artist and the materials you're working with," he said. "So that's a big part of the process: listening. In some ways, from your experience and what you see around you, you're sort of unconsciously guided or given impulse or opportunity to have an impulse. I pay attention to those. I work very intuitively, and I trust my intuition emphatically."

Tomlinson has had a long



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Robert Tomlinson goes through sketches at a workbench in his studio Friday afternoon. Behind him hangs a work in progress using bindings of books.

road to get where he is now. He has worked a lot of jobs helping organize nonprofits, teaching art to a variety of age groups and abilities, curating and directing art galleries, and, at one point, owning and operating his own retail shop.

Many of the jobs he has taken have been meant to let him spend more time in the studio, even though most of them have ended with just the opposite effect.

"I was going to work the store 50 percent of the time

and have my studio time," Tomlinson said of owning a retail shop. "I thought I was getting more studio time by doing this. When my partner left, I got stuck with the whole thing."

It takes a lot of time to focus on being an artist, he said.

"I was always making art, but what was missing was spending the time and energy to promote myself, to promote my career," Tomlinson said. "Still to this day, (promotion) takes 50 per-

cent of my time. People don't realize that. It's a huge amount of time and effort."

A serious health problem and resulting financial difficulties really turned his focus to following his path as an artist.

He found himself asking, "What do I really want to do?"

"There's nothing else to lose," Tomlinson said. "I really want to make art."

The seed to create art for a living was planted in Tomlinson's brain while he was

in high school.

"I went to my first open studio and saw how an artist can live," Tomlinson said. "I didn't even know about artist's studios. I didn't even know what they were. It changed my life. I had no idea that people lived like they did and they lived with art, and they had a workspace where they made art. It's fantastic!"

At the time, Tomlinson dabbled in poetry and music, playing both the guitar and percussion.

He started drawing while working with elementary school children at a private Quaker school in Pasadena, Calif.

He took his first and only art class in a barn while living in New Mexico.

Arts and language are important to Tomlinson for a number of reasons.

"What I think the arts contribute to is how we can think differently, how we can solve problems, how we can re-evaluate things," he said.

With everyone plugged in to various electronic devices, Tomlinson said people don't get a chance for self-reflection.

"Come on folks, take a walk in the woods, think about things," he said.

"Hopefully what the arts can bring is the importance of self-reflection and the ability to think differently, outside the box. That's crucial to have."



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Using spray paint, Robert Tomlinson creates new bits of potential art out of old mundane things.



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This loaf of bread will one day be a "loaf poem," written by Robert Tomlinson, poet and contemporary artist.



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Shelves are packed full of jars and boxes, each containing different tools to make contemporary art pieces.



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