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Chicago Life #6 (10/16/05)

A friend asked me, "Who are the Top Ten Chicago artists that everybody should know?" After thinking about it, I emailed some 500 artists and asked the artists to give me their Top Ten List of Living Chicago Artists. I think how the question was phrased influenced the answer—for example, I asked about the artists and not the art. They are related, of course, but the emphasis is different.

The results were fascinating, revealing that though the quality of the artist's work and aesthetic is the most important criterion, the artist's persona, contribution, content and influence are also important. In other words, it's the whole package, not just the artwork.

The spectrum of people on this list is broad: artists young and old, male and female, Chicago born, American-born, foreign-born, MacArthur Award recipients, and high school dropouts. In their own way, each of these incredible individuals has made a significant difference to art and life in Chicago and the world. The Top Ten became too narrow, so I expanded the list to the Top Fifteen, who really separated themselves from the rest.

There is insufficient space for me to properly elaborate on each of these remarkable artists, but let me try. Here's the list (More on each can be found online.):

Tony Fitzpatrick is a gregarious and wise dichotomy. Large in personality but delicate in his art work, his collages are all about Chicago and the history and magic he finds here. Besides his visual art he writes, acts, and is on the radio. He is a local treasure.

Sabrina Raaf is the youngest on the list. She creates machines that interact with their environment providing a pithy commentary on our lives and our future. She also renders fantastic, futuristic photographs that suggest a humor and capriciousness right around the corner.

Dan Peterman has made recycling an art form, elevating our consciousness about materials, community, rummaging, and resourcefulness. He revels in heightening our awareness of our surroundings and the possibilities of a conscientious existence.



Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's enigmatic art delves into our relationship with community, architecture, technology, place, and self. Often collaborating, he explores, documents, and comments on forces both natural and human that define and reshape our world.

Anne Wilson investigates the micro- and macrocosms of networks and matrices that exist in our society, world, and individual self. Moving from observations of personal ritual she

extrapolates to larger systems and examinations of their relationships.

Richard Rezac makes exquisite, minimal objects. Delicately, precisely, quietly and completely by hand, he manufactures human scale sculptures that transcend their materials and possess reverent, quixotic qualities that are simultaneously allusive and satisfying.

Kerry James Marshall is a brilliant artist who paints seemingly simple, large-scale pictures of ostensibly mundane African-American situations. Hidden within their surface gregariousness we grasp the depth of the glory and pain of his subjects' lives, community and environment.

Jim Nutt is a 'non-modern' modern artist who has meticulously painted imaginary portraits for over 30 years. For the past decade Women have been his subject. Each portion of the composition is an abstract gem and the work has become a riff on the possible variations of constant expression.

Tony Tasset's work employs humor and irony to explore context, meaning, and perception. Always witty and intelligent, he mines convention and undermines expectations, exploring contradictions and dichotomies of contemporary life.

Judy Ledgerwood makes beautiful abstract paintings. Restrained, subtle, frequently pastel shapes delicately interact. Within a single painting complex notions are asserted and contradicted, posited and reconsidered, harmonious yet contemplative.

Karl Wirsum has been a major figure on the Chicago art scene since emerging with the Hairy Who in the early '60s. Painting characters in the nether-world between superheroes and mundane domestic tasks, his images are fun, playful, and enduring.

Wesley Kimler's large, bold, dynamic, colorful, heroic paintings bridge the gap between realism and abstraction and loaded with content. Kimler is as creative in his career as he is in his art, collaborating with theater groups and musicians while all the while mentoring younger artists.

Dawoud Bey's warm personality enables his art, granting him access to the teenagers whose lives and personas he reveals through his camera's lens. Formal, yet casual, his work affords us a glimpse into a world that is foreign to most of us, yet exists in our midst.

Chris Ware writes and illustrates gorgeous comic books and has a huge international following that devours his brilliantly composed images. That he employs such high compositional strategies in such a seemingly plebian medium makes his work magic.

Industry of the Ordinary is Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson. They resemble merry pranksters as they celebrate the mundane and the ordinary, elevating it to an art form through their performances, which typically engage the public as participants. It's through the documentation that the project is completed.

These are all great artists, and in Chicago there are many more. They are all worth learning about. They improve the quality of this city, whether we know about it or not.