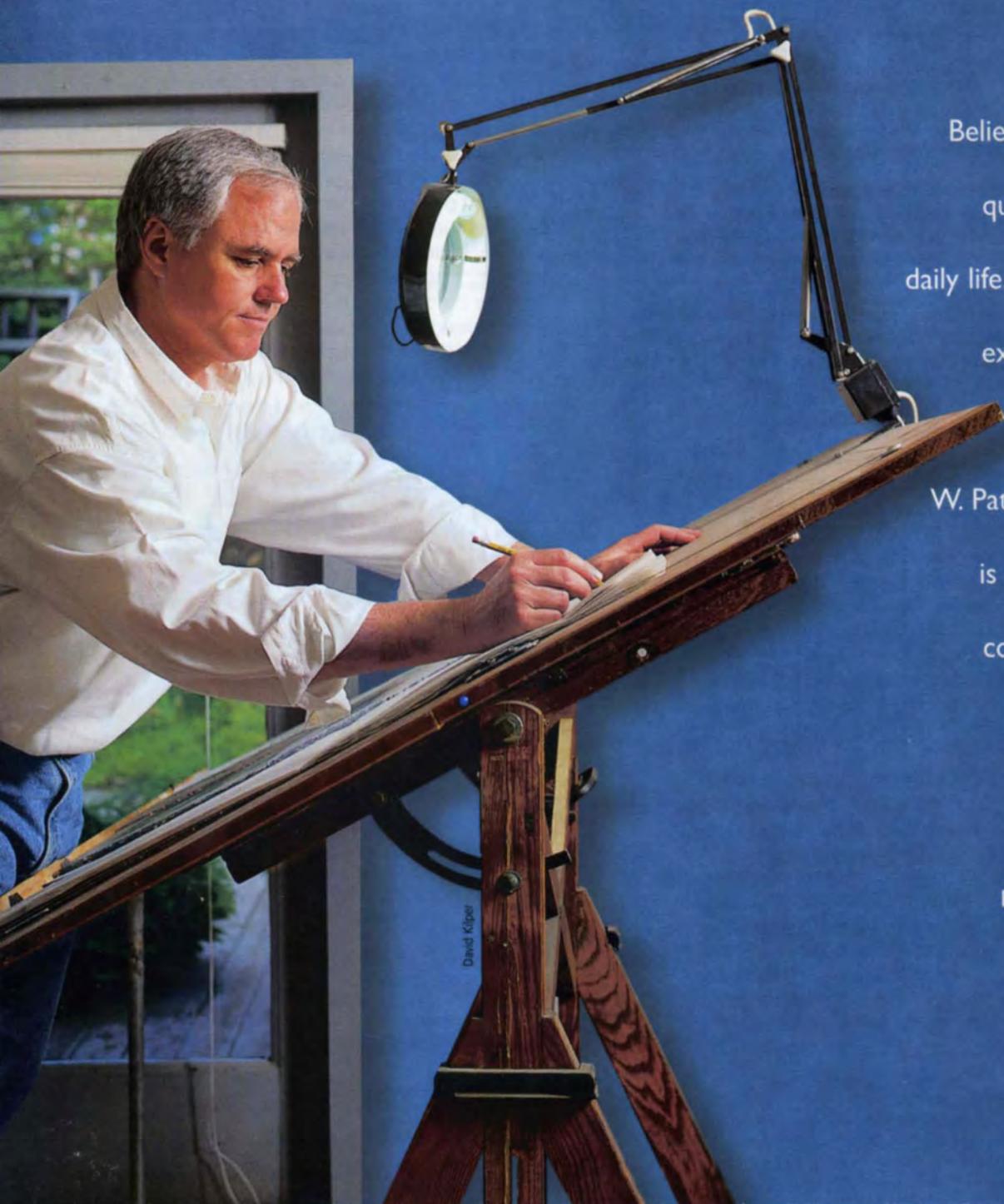


# Art as a Part of the



Believing art should quietly permeate daily life, internationally exhibited painter and sculptor W. Patrick Schuchard is creating for his community, from murals to city planning.

BY LIAM OTTEN

# World

**B**irds have wings, fish have fins, predators have sharp eyes and claws. In biology, form is determined by where an animal lives and what it does to survive. Form, that is, evolves to meet the needs of function.

It's a principle often on artist W. Patrick Schuchard's mind. An associate professor of art, Schuchard is an internationally

exhibited painter and sculptor who increasingly has taken on projects in the public sphere, including large-scale murals, architectural restoration, and even city planning.

"Who's to say an artist has to be one kind of animal?" Schuchard muses. "The form art takes is unpredictable, hard to pin down. It's not just about going to the studio every day—sometimes it's about making a thing, sometimes about affecting a place, sometimes about affecting the people who live in a place."

Last year, Schuchard became the first E. Desmond Lee Professor for Community Collaboration, a five-year appointment that will rotate through the University's five undergraduate schools. For Schuchard—whose career has included stints as gallery artist, carpenter, portrait painter, muralist, redeveloper, public artist, and preservationist—the appointment is a summation, knitting various personal and professional threads into whole cloth. Moreover, the professorship highlights two themes that have remained constant in his work—a concern for how art and life might be coaxed more closely together, and how their merger might redefine the artist's role in society. "The old modernist notion of the 'gallery artist' is really viable now for only a few people," Schuchard says. "I'm interested in the question of what it means to be an artist today—what other things an artist might do in our society."



**Facing page:** Pat Schuchard's studio is in the Webster Groves home he designed and built in the early '80s. **Above:** Painted banners now installed above Delmar Boulevard proclaim the city's people.

"Pat dedicates the same amount of thought and energy to his public charges that he gives to his own painting and sculpture," says Elizabeth Wright Millard, executive director of St. Louis' Forum for Contemporary Art. "He takes his interaction with the community very seriously and understands, partly because he's lived here most of his life, that the role of the artist in the community is not just that of an outsider."

Schuchard grew up in St. Louis, earned a B.F.A. degree in 1973 from Washington U.'s School of Fine Arts (as the School of Art was known then), studied for a year at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, and then earned his M.F.A. degree from the University of Southern Florida, Tampa. He taught for two years at the University of Delaware, in Newark, but in 1977 returned to St. Louis. "I'd been in school my whole life—undergraduate to graduate and straight into teaching," he explains. "I wanted to try some other things."

He joined a group of artists designing and building furniture at Mark Twain Bank's Fortune Interiors. The job, he says, gave him intensive on-the-job training in carpentry. In 1980 he undertook the construction of his own house; soon afterward, he and his wife, Terri, began buying and restoring St. Louis properties.

It was during this period that Schuchard—by now teaching courses at a number of local colleges, including Washington U.'s School of Architecture—gave up abstract painting for still life. A few years later, he began to create highly realistic sculptures: a wax piano, a series of wax-on-felt album covers, an eight-foot study of the late Robert Wadlow, Alton, Illinois' "gentle giant."

"I never considered myself a realist artist," Schuchard recalls. "Despite working with recognizable things, representation was more a means to an end. There was a kind of affection in those works, an acceptance of banality and beauty—a respect for the face of the world as it actually exists."



David Kiper

Though he continued to paint and sculpt, by the close of the decade Schuchard was disaffected with the capricious, sometimes political gallery system and sought new artistic outlets. In 1989, he cofounded the Blue Moon Gallery, an alternative exhibition space in the Washington Avenue loft district, where he initiated a series of town meetings for the arts.

Schuchard also began to combine his artistic skills with his construction experience. In 1987, he created a 6,000-square-foot *trompe l'oeil* architectural mural on commission for the Lashley & Baer Building downtown, and an even larger mural in 1988 at 705 Olive Street.

"I didn't know the first thing about working on that scale," Schuchard admits. "But the projects combined all the things I liked to do—designing an image, working with construction crews, building scaffolding, and meeting other logistical challenges. It was a good, healthy mix of public and personal."

Other commissions soon followed: a 4,000-square-foot mural for Oaklawn Park, in Hot Springs, Arkansas; three projects, from 4,500 to 6,000 square feet, in Owensboro, Kentucky; a 7,000-square-foot cast concrete mural for the University of Texas at San Antonio. By the mid-1990s, Schuchard was being consulted on a variety of public projects, including the St. Louis Public Library's renovation of its Divoll Branch and the design of the proposed commuter rails system for Bi-State Development Agency.

"I began to think of sculpture not just as something that sits on a pedestal or a lawn someplace, but as a broader activity that might include designing a building or the entrance to a building or the walkway in front of it," he explains. "Sculpture could be a statement inherent to the fabric of a place, rather than something dropped in at the last moment."

"As an artist, you have to ask yourself what most affects the visual presence of the world around you," Schuchard continues. "You look at parts of St. Louis and realize that no single piece of art is going to fix anything. You need to think about the entire place, the people, the infrastructure, the local community. And maybe that means taking a cue from minimalism and allowing art to become a subtler sort of activity, maybe just a kind of maintenance or repair. Art is usually thought of as adding to a place, but maybe sometimes it needs to subtract, to remove visual static the way a landscaper

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# Art

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try not to go about this with missionary zeal," Schuchard jokes, though the pace of his activities can suggest a man with a mission. In 1993, he became head of the School of Art's painting program and in 1997 received the professorship for community collaboration. He exhibits painting and sculpture; has a thriving practice as a portrait painter; is restoring his turn-of-the-century farm, Deer Leap Lodge, on a river bluff north of Cuba, Missouri; and continues his consulting work with Arts in Transit.

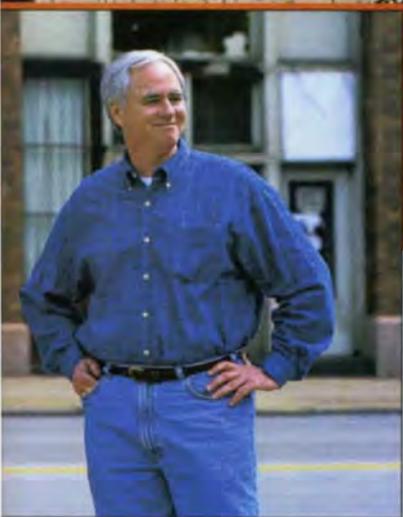
Last summer, Schuchard began work on a large-scale outdoor tile and terrazzo mural depicting Forest Park's history for the new entrance to the Missouri Historical Society. Earlier, he had hosted a series of town meetings at which diverse St. Louisans discussed the park's role in their lives. "People talked about everything from flying kites and ice skating to taking drugs and rock and roll," he says with a grin.

"Pat manages to juggle an amazing number of activities while producing work of the highest quality," says Joe Deal, dean of the School of Art. "He brings the exacting standards of his own studio practice to everything he does, whether making public art or organizing a new initiative or interacting with the community."

Today, Schuchard participates in or sits on the boards of local arts groups such as the St. Louis Gallery Association, the Forum for Contemporary Art, the



Pat Schuchard



David Kipper

**Far left:** Working with felt, oil paint, and beeswax, in the late '80s W. Patrick Schuchard began making realistic sculpture like this life-size replica of a baby grand piano, which fools visitors to his home. **Left:** Schuchard's efforts led to the School of Art's agreement with NationsBank and the Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance to rehab a historic warehouse (background), where young artists will live and work. **Above:** Created for the University of Texas at San Antonio, "Building Skin" is a 7,000-square-foot cast-concrete mural in that city as "the People Walls." **Below:** The artist created a total of 32 album covers of wax and oil paint for his "Wall of Sound" series (1990-92).

Clayton Public Art Commission, and the St. Louis 2004 Cultural Task Force. He is also a founding member and spokesperson for Critical Mass, a group working to develop grants for talented young artists and to promote regional appreciation of the visual arts. It has sponsored artists' town hall meetings, the city series exhibition, and the annual Passport to Contemporary Art.

Over the last year, Schuchard has led an effort that is transforming a historic downtown warehouse, owned by the University, into 26 live/work loft apartments for young artists, and a gallery and restaurant. "A lot of the work I've been doing simply tries to make St. Louis a more attractive place for young artists to live," he explains. "I want to find ways to keep them here and to take advantage of their talents."

In 1997, with a grant from the Missouri Arts Council, Schuchard designed a project for the Delmar and Forest Park MetroLink area. School of Art students J.C. Steinbrunner, Erik Wicker, and Schuchard's son, Alex, all B.F.A. '98, helped him create 32 hand-painted, seven-foot-tall banners, each portraying a local resident.

"We spent a few days on Delmar, going from shop to shop taking photographs," recalls Steinbrunner, who was in the painting program. "We'd describe the project and have people sign consent forms so we could use their image."

"Then we went back to the studio and painted the images with signpainter's paint," adds Erik Wicker. "It was a lot of fun, and of course we got paid for it."

David Kipper

**B**ut for all his public projects and grassroots activities, Schuchard shies away from the activist label. "I don't think of myself as a do-gooder," he says. "This is just what comes to me naturally—the way my work and interests have evolved over the years."

"I think the generation now in school will have a far broader conception of what artists might do in society," he adds. "In my own work, I try to make something that's potent but that also grafts with the world. In surgery, a successful skin graft is one you can't see, one that bonds with existing tissue. Maybe sometimes the real skill of the artist is to graft his or her work so seamlessly that art and life can merge." (W)

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