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Your Weekly News Magazine

October 24, 2007 • Vol. 29 • No. 43 • www.PulseDT.com

Hilde's brand of art comes to town

By Zachary Petit

BELLEVUE—Pop culture seems to swallow you whole here.

A gargantuan Bengal Tiger paws at Paul Brown Stadium, gouging a few extra ruts through the 50-yard line with its massive claws. Nearby, Muhammad Ali is in the process of delivering a bone-crushing blow that looks like it could quake the very building in which it stands. Elsewhere, Jack Nicholson puffs on a cigarette, craftily presiding over the whole scene with his trademark devilish grin as Johnny Cash, Alice Cooper and Forrest Gump look on.

This is Tyler Hildebrand's world.

Aptly titled "Hilde's Gallery," the 306 Fairfield Ave. locale has been offering Hildebrand's trademark medley of stylized art and T-shirts since its grand opening Oct. 6.

A mere 23 years old, he might seem a little young for a gallery. After all, the artist himself never really thought he'd have one so soon. After graduating from the Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida, however, Hildebrand was sitting on a stockpile of art, and everything just kind of fell into place across the river from his native Cincinnati.

"I figured 'what the hell,' and just started looking around," he says. "Bellevue seemed to be the perfect spot."

Standing in his gallery and flanked by giant murals, lava lamps and paintings of celebrities, Cincinnati skylines and Queen City

sports icons, Hildebrand doesn't really seem like your stereotypical artist. Seemingly lacking in any and all pretension, he looks kind of like a college student hanging about in shorts and a T-shirt — albeit one of his own design — and his chilled-out aura juxtaposes the wilder eccentricities that might possibly be found in some of his creative colleagues.

When painting, Hildebrand focuses on having fun and worries about selling the piece later. As it turns out, his approach pays off. Even though his gallery had only been open for five days when he was interviewed by the Downtowner for this article, he had already sold a few major paintings and was in the midst of creating new ventures in their wake. Hildebrand prefers to create his own renditions of the things he grew up loving, often taking only one day to complete his works.

"I paint some caricatures, but nothing really serious," he says. "I don't have any really deep, meaningful paintings. It's stuff that everybody can appreciate."

Hildebrand's cousin Eric Fry, a school teacher in the Forest Hills district, agrees.

"It kind of touches a broad base," he says. "Even if you're not an art fan, I think it's still going to attract your eye. It has a unique style to it."

By setting up shop in Bellevue, Fry says Hildebrand has taken his passion for art and planted his roots in an up-and-coming area. While Hildebrand may break many art molds, there's one thing that he

does conform to: he's had a love for the craft since day one.

"Art has always been Tyler's thing," Fry says. "No matter what he's been through, he has always fallen back on the art. What's different is that he's making his living on it now."

Hildebrand says his loose, exaggerated style is heavily influenced by Cincinnati *Enquirer* cartoonist Jim Borgman, whose work the young artist was raised on. Nowadays, it still comes in handy for him — when stricken by artist's block,

he tends to graze Borgman's books for inspiration.

As for his new Bellevue base, Hildebrand says the city is full of good art galleries, and he's optimistic about the future of his own.

"It's going pretty good so far, so if nothing else the rent's cheap and I'm not really losing too much," he says. "I figured I'd give it a shot."

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Artist Tyler Hildebrand stands among murals of some familiar legends inside his new Fairfield Ave. gallery.