



MEDIA AND MESSAGES

Jeffrey Scott Lewis has something to say

Jeffrey Scott Lewis is more than an extraordinarily promising artist. True, that would be enough for most folks. His mixed-media works, edging on the abstract, are startling and arresting. But there's more here than an impressive picture. Take a second, more measured look and you realize there's a message imbedded in that collage. There's a lesson and a suggestion for how to live one's life better.

That message is not an accident. But neither is it something meant to hit the viewer over the head. Lewis's work is what might be termed "thoughtful art." It stops you with its color and composition, and then invites you into the realm of ideas and ideals.

"My philosophy of color and composition is to grab the attention of the passerby," Lewis says in the artist's statement from his *Recycling Children* series. But once

the attention is grabbed, he hopes the viewer will pause and consider just what it is he is conveying. His work, he notes, is "social commentary at the same time as it is art."

The *Recycling Children* series is, perhaps, the one most dear to his heart. The parent of three adopted children, he (and his late wife, Rhonda) spent years in Florida's foster parent program, seeing firsthand the vast numbers of youngsters awaiting—and hoping for—the chance to become part of a loving family. These children are "considered damaged goods," he says. Many have experienced abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment. But all they really want is someone to love them, accept them, and give them the chance to fulfill their potential.

"My wife and I were very much involved with the Florida State Foster Parents and the National Adoption

Society," Lewis says. "We were named the Adoptive Parents of the Year in 1997. We felt we needed to continue with this. There are so many kids wanting to be part of a family, and people just didn't know."

Already the mother and adoptive father of one child, the Lewises adopted two biracial children, now ten and nine. In 2001 fate dealt an unexpected blow when Lewis' wife died. "I sort of crawled into a hole with the kids then," he recalls.

Then he decided the best thing he could do was to give voice to his beliefs through his art.

Having earned an associate of arts degree in 1983, Lewis had worked at his trade for years, designing window displays for businesses and ultimately landing a position with Walt Disney World, where he was part of the team that designed the Animal Kingdom.

After his wife's death, he moved to Ft. Myers. Emerging from the dark days and in his 40s, he decided to enroll at Florida Gulf Coast University. He graduated magna cum laude in 2004. "It was a way to be with my kids and still be productive," he explains.

Afraid of being labeled a "student artist," Lewis was reluctant during his school years to show his work, but the experience stoked his creative fire. One professor, Mary Voytek, challenged the class to create a painting based on one of the essential elements—earth, air, fire, or water. Lewis, who tends to work in series, found the challenge irresistible. He ended up with separate series on each of those elements, a total of twenty-six paintings. One painting from each series was selected for the first of an ongoing series of exhibitions jointly sponsored by the United Arts Council of Collier County and Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, which was displayed through the summer.

But the passion for the plight of children needing homes wouldn't leave him, and Lewis soon found himself crafting pieces for his *Recycling Children* series. "There are currently over 135,000 children in this country who await adoption," he points out. "It is a statistical fact that children who grow up in foster care are more likely to grow into social outcasts who ultimately wind up as a burden to society as they enter the judicial system and, finally, the penal system. They are not, however, lost causes. We can recycle them back into society by promoting their adoption into permanent families."

Lewis's *Recycling Children* paintings incorporate children's faces and text designed to testify to their pasts, presents, and futures. Words that suggest what they might have experienced in the past are written in reverse, as if seen looking back through a window. The present is represented by words of rescue—"love" or "security," for example.

Words of the future present the goal—"family" or "adoption."

"The painting style is chaotic, emotional, and dynamic, just like the subject matter," Lewis explains. "I want people to question their attitudes towards adoption, towards mixed-race families, towards same-sex couples adopting, and towards single-parent families."

Lewis premiered this series at FGCU's Margaret S. Sugden Welcome Center this past summer. Some of the paintings are currently included in a three-man show at the Lee County Alliance of the Arts, a fitting display as November is National Adoption Awareness Month. But the artist has even loftier goals for *Recycling Children*. He has been in touch with the director of the galleries at the state Capitol building about the possibility of exhibiting the works there in a future November.

"The Capitol is booked through 2006, but this is the type of message I think they will want," Lewis notes. "If it takes five years, that's really not that long. This is something I'll probably work on the rest of my life. I'm continually updating and creating more."

While Lewis is committed to bringing this series to as many people as possible, the creating more he mentions isn't confined to works on this theme. He is also working on a series he calls *Attachment and Detachment*.

"This series probably has the least social commentary of any I've done," he says. "It started as *There Are No Scraps*, because I had all these little scraps of canvas, and it bothered me to throw them out. So I started playing around with them, moving them together and attaching them to other canvases. These works are more about geometry and color."

Although *Attachment and Detachment* shows a lighter side of Lewis, it's a safe bet that social commentary will continue to infuse his works. Art is the means through which he thinks, solves, and creates. In the statement accompanying his Fire series, he challenges viewers: "Never let your Fire be extinguished." For Lewis, the creative flames are burning brightly. 🔥

Janina Birtolo is a writer and actor who lives and works in Naples.

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Works by Jeffrey Scott Lewis are on display through Thanksgiving at the Lee County Alliance of the Arts, Ft. Myers. For more information, contact Lewis at 239/826-5626 or via e-mail at jsl4art@comcast.net.