



A Healthy Obsession

By the time you finish reading this article, Jeff Schwartz will have finished another painting. ■ BY MARK SANDERS

The kids are in bed and most of the lights are off in Jeff Schwartz's house. Frogs outside join in a post-thunderstorm chorus loud enough to conjure images of a far-off village in the rainforest, though we're sitting in Schwartz's immaculate two-story home in central Sarasota, in a tidy old neighborhood a few blocks from the north Siesta Key bridge. His wife, Kate, sits nearby, trading anecdotes with Schwartz about their nine years of matrimony. Above Schwartz hangs a large, dark painting of a chicken coop.

Schwartz, who is responsible for both the years-old chicken coop piece and 35 newer works that comprise his one-man show, opening Friday night at Greene Contemporary, doesn't unwind like this too often. As he sprawls out on a sofa, sipping pinot noir with sock-clad feet perched on an ottoman, he confesses to being a busybody, fueled by caffeine and an innate knack for multitasking. Yet the work he does, whether it's cooking, fixing-up his house or creating new still-lives (he's completed one every day for the past three weeks), is not obsessive compulsion for the sake of obsessive compulsion. Schwartz's hellbent nature is balanced by his artistic tangents — the sort of ideas that earn painters the "eccentric" tag — and as his newest body of work shows, these neuroses often produce beautiful byproducts.

"I always have two things going at once," he says, rising from the sofa and walking into his home studio. "Multitasking fits my personality." As evidence, the 37-year-old Seattle native shows off some of his one-a-day works, a series of oil paintings that adhere to a well-known still-life theme: food. An upside-down mackerel hangs on a muted off-white wall in one painting, covering nearly half the canvas. Other pieces conform to the same dimensions: radishes, bok choy and a steak all hang in repose on the same creamy background of identical 8-by-10 inch canvases.

There's nothing to "get" when observing these paintings — a radish here is exactly that, a radish — so there's no need to ponder the deeper meaning of radish-ness. Schwartz himself admits that this series of paintings, like the other phases of his 18-year-long artistic career, grew (excuse the food pun) organically and without pretense. "I'd be lying to say there was anything deep about them," he sighs.

It began with a project for his freshman students at Ringling School of Art & Design, where he's taught for eight years. The assignment was straightforward: paint a still life of lemons in a bowl, learn something about light and color. Schwartz began focusing on the subtleties of painting food in his own work this June. He notes a particular



MAY THE SCHWARTZ BE WITH YOU: The artist at work.

occasion when he was grocery shopping at Whole Foods and saw the perfect rows of produce. He began studying the imperfect, "things that aren't so beautiful," he says.

Schwartz found something poetic in how, after he'd bring a "subject" home from the grocery store, its composition would dramatically change, almost before his eyes. A mackerel he bought from Walt's Fish Market and then nailed to his wall began to decompose. After a couple days, Schwartz's studio smelled like a cannery.

"[The 17th-Century Baroque artist] Caravaggio dug up dead bodies," for his paintings, notes Schwartz. A tad sarcastically, he quips, "I'm not quite there yet."

Unconventional as his fish-nailing-to-the-wall may be, Schwartz admits to other, more practical reasons for these little paintings: they sell better than the big ones, and he gains instant gratification from making them so quickly. "It's like candy in a drug store," he says, both for him and potential buyers. It's a quick rush for the artist; for art collectors, the investment is minimal and less likely to incite buyer's remorse.

This marks a dramatic shift from Schwartz's previous work. For a long time he was fixated on

large-scale projects, both in terms of his art and his personal life. Artistically, he was drawn to in-depth pieces like the 5-by-6-foot chicken coop painting that hangs in his living room (he's long been fascinated by physical space, and refers to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* as a big inspiration).

A more dramatic example is Schwartz's own house, which he remodeled almost entirely by himself. It was a typical money pit scenario, where the artist, despite his long history as an amateur home renovator, didn't know exactly what he was dealing with. Originally planned as a four-month project (he and Kate bought the house in 2000), he realized after eight months of tearing down walls and adding entire rooms that an eternity's worth of wiring, tiling, drywalling and other construction issues lay ahead. He called in friends to help, and after four years, had a finished product.

At the same time he was teaching and working a retail job on the weekends.

"Feeling productive is tied to his self-worth," Kate says. This quality goes back — way back — to the artist's childhood. His parents divorced when he was in grade school, and Schwartz, the self-described

mediator of his clan, had to assume the role of someone much older. "I never had a chance to be reckless," he says. That self-discipline he cultivated as a child spilled over to adulthood. He typically paints late at night, but rarely sleeps past 7 a.m.

"I have to make him take naps," says Kate.

The frenetic pace is beginning to calm, if only slightly. Schwartz, despite his remodeling expertise, no longer takes on other people's fixer-upper projects. Painting wise, he's begun to adopt an almost Zen-like approach toward work. He's learning how not to overthink, and in turn, overwork (Schwartz admits that he used to paint over his old works).

"I've been painting for 18 years," Schwartz says. Now, he adds, "I paint by intuition, knowing it'll work out somehow. After a while, you learn to trust yourself — it comes and goes — but right now I'm there. I feel good. Everything's in place."

Jeff Schwartz's recent work is on display at Greene Contemporary, 556 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota, Sept. 1-30. An opening reception is from 6-9 p.m. For more details, visit www.greenecontemporary.com or www.jeffreyhschwartz.com.