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A man in constant motion

By John E. Mitchell, North Adams Transcript Article Launched: 01/25/2008 11:34:13 AM EST

Friday, January 25

ADAMS — Trying to pin down artist Todd Houlobek is an impossible feat — with seemingly boundless energy and interest in a variety of mediums, Houlobek will have you guessing what he will crate next.

"I'm like a shark," he said. "If I stop, I die, it's terrible."

Houlobek's installation at Greylock Arts in Adams gathers his various endeavors under one roof for a true menagerie of contemporary art. Even when he dabbles in traditional media — paper — the presentation is anything but. In the back of the gallery is a mural made up of separate slips of paper, based on a GIF file that he downloaded from the Internet about 15 years ago and has been tinkering with since.

"Over the years I've redrawn it," said Houlobek. "You know how when you switch computers, you always lose one or two files? I've never lost this file. It's one of those things. And it's been through a good number of computers and hard drives and floppy disks. If I could have only recorded the story of this one file, where it's been stored and copied and retrieved and saved, it'd be a pretty interesting story."

Houlobek is also showing three small paintings that he crafted on

Click photo to enlarge [Photo of Todd Houlobek] Artist Todd Houlobek John E. Mitchell/North Adams Transcript

a trip to Cuba — he carries a miniature watercolor kit wherever he

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goes — accompanied by audio recordings of the places he painted them. He has also sculpted a portrait of himself as a Japanese fighting robot with real working parts and lights, built giant sliding puzzles that always match up and several clocks that, instead of numbers, feature instruction on cuts of beef according to different cultures.

"It's sort of like in the old movies with the newsroom and behind the newscaster there's New York, London, India," said

Houlobek. "On another level, the whole idea is taking a structure that we're very familiar with, like the clock face, and since that is so ingrained in our psyche, we think about it all the time, when you're driving a car, you have your hands at 10 and 2, old movies about the Air Force and 'bogey at 12 o'clock.' Here I've made clocks where I'm superimposing information on to a structure that we already know. Not only can you tell time, but you can learn what the parts of beef as they are cut in America or England, or 12 of the deities in Hindu religion."

Houlobek also crafted what he calls "The Fibonacci Pole," which features a line of lights going upward, sequenced to the Fibonacci number system, which creates the illusion that the light is bouncing off the floor and up the pole. The device resulted from Houlobek taking what is a simple and common way for people to learning microprocessor programming and expanding it.

"Usually the first thing you do is you get a light to blink on and off," said Houlobek. "You program a micro controller — do I know what I'm doing, am I programming this correctly, let me test it. It's sort of the "Hello, world!" of microprocessor programming. So I got a light to blink and I thought 'what if I get eight lights to blink in a series according to a number sequence?' The motion of the light is dictated by the number sequence and the form of the pieces is dictated by the number sequence. What I found interesting about this, I did the work, but in a way I didn't, I used numbers to achieve this effect for me. Instead of sitting down for four days and going "Okay, this one needs to go so fast, this one needs to go a little faster, a little faster, a little faster," which is possible, but it's kind of a painstaking process. When I applied a number sequence, all of a sudden, a good portion of the job was done for me, which I sort of attribute to the amazing nature of numbers."

Perhaps Houlobek's most complex work is his light garden, which consists of an old 17-inch LCD screen and tiny circles of film spread all over it. An LCD screen works thanks to a layer of polarized film that redirects the light, allowing you to see the image it projects. Houlobek took that layer off of the screen and cut it up into small bits and scattered them around, providing tools for visitors to move the bits around while images are projected underneath.

"This kind of thing originated from me playing around with old broken electronics," he said. "I was able to get parts of them working. I ended up with this really cool light table that would allow you to play with material on the top and it would change colors. They change color, but what they're really doing is revealing what's underneath. Since they're all really, really small, it's not easy to make out a composite picture, so I'm editing visual information by only giving you little dots."

Houlobek grew up on a farm in Wisconsin and that's where he discovered his aptitude for tinkering, nurtured by his father and born from that attitude that fixing something through improvisation was a lot more preferable to driving 10 miles down the road to buying a replacement bolt. This knack evolved into a full-fledged bug to build things.

"One of the things I used to do was I would design and build furniture," said Houlobek. "I love making furniture. I just didn't have the cash, it was easier to find wood on the street. At one point, I made everything in my house, then my parents came over for a visit and they

were like, 'Forget it, we're getting you a sofa.'"

Even with the new sofa, the designing and building continued. Houlobek is especially enthused by creating work environments that function as alternatives to traditional desks. He also likes modifying furniture for new uses, as evidenced in his rolling car seats that are featured in the gallery, the result of trying to replace his own when they were stolen from his car.

"My car got broken into and they took all the seats," said Houlobek. "Left me the car, took the seats. That's really weird, right? So I had to find new seats. I rented a van, went to the junkyard, got some seats, they didn't fit, so now I have two seats in my house that I'm not using. Then I found two more, but I only found the front seats, I couldn't find the back seat. I used those for a while, but then I found a back seat that came with front seats, I couldn't break up that package, so I got the package, I got front and back seats, but now I've got four car seats that I'm not doing anything with, they've been sitting in my house for a long time. I keep thinking that I'm going to stick these things on wheels at some point so that people have a place to sit, and so here they are — I found these amazing surplus tires, nice pneumatic tires, too, like you fill them with air, it's a real comfortable ride. I put the seats on top and, I tell you, they're like nap magnets. You just sit there and pretend you're riding along and you just fall to sleep."

Technology and the desire to understand it is central to Houlobek's life and work. There was an era when magazines like "Popular Mechanics" ruled the newsstands and lots of guys craved plans to create his own stereo system, but Houlobek acknowledges that those days are past and nowadays such endeavors are the province of a grassroots movement of do-it-yourself technologists like himself. Houlobek sees it as a result of the decline of American manufacturing — and bottom line thinking that has killed innovation. He thinks a basic technical knowledge is its own reward.

"When it comes to electricity, it's almost like literacy," he said, "where it gets to be important to learn to read and right, now, in a lot of ways, it's very important to know how to connect power and ground, or what is the difference between AC power and DC power? Basic literacy on this alone will change your perception on all sorts of things that you look at. You look at traffic lights and, all of a sudden, even if you're wrong, you can begin to theorize on how that traffic light is working. You can at least make a wrong assumption about it, whereas before, you could look at it and say 'How does it know to red every time I pull up to it?'"

Alongside technology, the other most important component to Houlobek's work is a sense of humor. This harkens back to his days as a drama student, where he formed a comedy troupe that eventually ended up on MTV as "The State." They got their start on a show called "You Wrote It, You Watch It," which they did with John Stewart. Houlobek has come to feel that a sense of humor is mandatory in art.

"Sometimes if it's not fun, you almost don't understand it," said Houlobek. "You just stand there and say 'Well, I guess the artist knew what they were talking about.' If there's an element of fun in it, or at least a sense of humor, I think we relate to that a lot more."

Humor is so second nature to his creative endeavors, though, that he says he never intentionally crafts anything for laughs — it all just comes out in the process. You might even say the humor is a result of improv work.

"When I think of an idea, then I think of something, and then half way through, you're like 'It'd be pretty goofy if I did this' and then you're like 'Hey, that's not a half bad idea!' And you do it," he said.

It's an attitude that Houlobek has been able to translate into his work as a teacher at New York University's Interactive Tele-communications Program, a job that's not only given him the opportunity to pass his ideas onto students, but has also kept him energized and informed in his own art.

"I've been teaching and learning — that's the cycle, you teach what you've learned and then you have to keep learning so you can teach more," said Houlobek, "and so I've been doing that for seven years and I guess you could say that it's the only perpetual motion machine that really exists, one just feeds the other, because the more you teach, the more you learn, and it just keeps going and never stops. I've been enjoying that a great deal."

And the perpetual motion machine of teaching continues to fuel the other perpetual motion machine — himself.

"That's actually why I went to graduate school," said Houlobek. "I went through undergrad, I've had a full, kind of successful career on television, and I was like I really have to focus, I have too many things, I started building furniture while I was in television and all this stuff and I thought 'I'm just going to focus myself with graduate school.' But I went to ITP, which only gave me more skills. At a certain point, you've got to give into it, this is me, it's what am, what I do, so I'm back into doing as much as I can for as long as I can until I can't anymore. And I haven't been disappointed."

Todd Houlobek is currently showing at Greylock Arts in Adams. He can be found online at www.toddhouloubek.com.

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