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Artist Tom Maniaci of Bloomfield Hills has two careers: He is creative director for a Southfield ad agency, and he is a pop-art painter and cartoonist. Some of his work, such as his most popular — a 54-by-54-inch portrait of John Lennon — he re-creates so people can pay to paint it (by the numbers) themselves as nonprofit fund-raisers.

Adman thrives in pop-art genre

Bloomfield Hills artist influenced by Warhol, Lichtenstein donates work for charity auctions

By ALEX P. KELLOGG
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

His art sits in one of Michigan native Kid Rock's recording studios and in soul singer Usher's Atlanta offices. And soon, somewhere in pop star Fergie's life, a portrait he painted will go on prominent display.

Tom Maniaci went the practical route after college when he decided on a career in advertising instead of the tough life of an aspiring painter or perhaps a cartoonist, two of his early passions.

For a long time, he didn't look back, becoming the creative director of Sussman, Sikes & Associates, an ad agency with regional name recognition based in Southfield.

Still with the agency, the married Bloomfield Hills father of two is enjoying success in a second career as well — one that's cultivating his talents as a pop-art painter and cartoonist.

Maniaci, with two of his ad-agency bosses, co-owns a business called Frame Your Face, selling his art. The business's tagline, "Pop Portraits of Anyone Who is or Was," sums up Maniaci's goal there.

But he is finding the most satisfaction in charitable endeavors related to making large, eye-catching canvas paintings by hand and on a computer, reminiscent of Andy Warhol's pop art, though they're much more lighthearted and less chock-full of social commentary, he says. As interest in his work has grown, he has often donated it to charities for auction.

"Obviously, Warhol and Katz and Lichtenstein were huge influences on me," said Maniaci, whose splashes of pastel colors in his portraits reflect the work of those artistic giants. Warhol, Alex Katz and Roy Lichtenstein made popular art and its influence legitimate in the modern and post-modern artistic canon.

"But I'm not doing what they were doing, obviously," said Maniaci. "They were making statements. I'm not making a statement, except sometimes we can laugh at ourselves."

Typically, his portraits include sarcastic phrases that iconic figures have or might have said. Take Freud saying, "I hope my slip isn't showing," for example, which hangs in a 24-by-24-inch frame outside his office, with Freud in a blue shirt against a yellow background.

Some of his work, such as his most popular — a 54-by-54-inch portrait of John Lennon — he often re-creates over and over again so people can pay to paint it themselves — as in paint by numbers — for nonprofit fund-raisers so others can watch before the paintings are sold. One such painting is going to be up for auction next month at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Bloomfield Hills, one of two fund-raisers the school conducts each year. Maniaci hopes his painting will raise more than \$1,000 for the December event. He averages \$1,100 per event.



Maniaci is co-owner of Frame Your Face, which he started in 2001.



Photos by DAVID KILKENNEY/Special to the Free Press

Artist Tom Maniaci produces hybrid artwork by using pencil, then ink drawing, and finishing it using computer software in combination to produce "Pop Portraits of Anyone Who is or Was," the tagline of the business he created to sell his work.

The signs of how much Maniaci borrowed from Warhol and others are plain in his work, some of which — including a portrait of Bill Clinton in blue shirt and yellow tie, which says "Never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel!" — decorate the hall outside his office.

"It's really great for him, it's something outside of the regular business routine, and he really enjoys doing it," said Maniaci's wife, Liz Maniaci.

They have two sons, Alex, 17, and Matthew, 14; both attend Seaholm High School in Birmingham.

Tom Maniaci started Frame Your Face in 2001 but only recently got the business off the ground enough to push it aggressively. His day-job ad clients include Weight Watchers, House of Blinds & Drapery and Henry Ford OptimEyes.

He says he hopes his side gig will move from breaking even to making money next year, though most of what's been holding that up is how often he and his two other business partners — Alan Sussman and Diana Sikes — choose to donate his work.

"We haven't had time to market it a great deal," said Sussman, who is also the president of the ad agency where Maniaci works. "It's been pretty successful for something that's had to go it on its own, so I think we're pretty pleased with it."

"The charity side of it has seemed to really take off; we've done a great number of charity events."

Maniaci donated two Clinton portraits to the Oakland County Democratic Party earlier this year, one a 24-by-24-inch framed print and the other a 54-by-54-inch paint by the numbers. He also donated a Steve Yzerman portrait (signed by the former Red Wings player) to Detroit Country Day School for an annual spring fund-raiser last year.

The Academy of the Sacred Heart fund-raiser is scheduled for Dec. 7.

"It'll be a great addition; it's something different for people to do," said Gwen North of the large paint-by-numbers Lennon portrait, which shows him saying "Imagine" in a comic strip-style word bubble.

North, who lives in Bloomfield Hills, has two boys at the school and is helping organize the fund-raiser.

So what about drawing comics?

"I almost went that direction," said Maniaci. "I had a comic named 'Space Punk: Adolescent Savior of the Universe.' I drew him all through college and a little bit after college."

Thank goodness for the day job, though, he says. He's not sure Space Punk would have landed him a home in Bloomfield Hills. But being an ad guy did.

For more information on Maniaci's art, go to www.frameyourface.com.

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