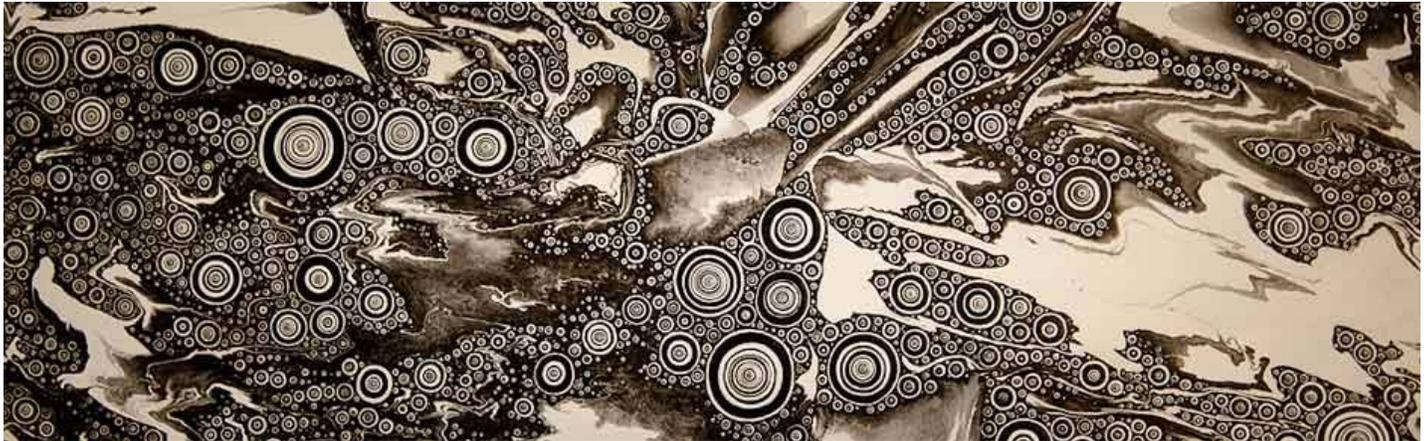


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A PAINTING DETAIL OF GRAND RAPIDS BASED ARTIST JOEL BERRY - BRIAN KELLY

## Features



JOEL BERRY

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For artist Joel Berry, the world can be black and white  
Some art you pass by, some art you look at, and some art sucks you in.

Local artist Joel Berry creates the third kind, turning everyday objects into art that is far from commonplace.

## For artist Joel Berry, the world can be black and white

MITCHELL TERPSTRA  
THURSDAY, JULY 15, 2010

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Joel Berry sees a canvas in everything.

On the shelves in his studio apartment on the [Avenue for the Arts](#), miscellaneous items huddle decoratively together: fragments of rock from Lake Huron's shoreline, a 10-inch, rabbit-eared console television, a veritable pack of miniature ceramic poodles, Construx building toy pieces, Berry's old pinewood derby racer, his old retainer, even a few of his childhood molars.

It's an understandably bizarre assortment of things -- except for the fact that each specimen is overlaid in bewildering patterns and concentric circles of black-and-white acrylic paint.

"This one," says [Berry](#), delicately holding up the smallest of the ceramic poodles between his index finger and thumb, "took me between 10 and 20 hours to finish." The figurine, which is so wildly painted that it takes a while for the eyes to focus on it, stands less than an inch tall, and its infinitesimal level of detail requires a magnifying glass to fully appreciate.

But it is the fractured Huron rocks -- not the poodles -- that are the mainstay of his oeuvre.

Berry combs the shoreline for them whenever he visits his mother's cottage near Rogers City, foraging for the already broken pieces.

"Sometimes I'll just find a rock like this," Berry says, displaying a cannonball-sized piece of limestone split cleanly down the middle.

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"Though one of my favorite things to do is throw rocks, smashing them open." Berry then uses the newly revealed interior surfaces as canvases for painting, improving upon nature by spending many finger-aching hours applying his whimsical designs. He finishes the designs with a quadruple-0 Winsor & Newton paintbrush—a brush so small its tip is made of approximately four synthetic hairs, making the final details virtually undetectable to the naked eye.

The 29-year-old Berry hesitantly refers to Rochester Hills, where he grew up, as home, though he made the move to Grand Rapids nine years ago, attracted by [Grand Valley State University's art program](#). After he graduated in 2005 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts in printmaking, he became a full-time employee for [LaFontsee Gallery/Underground Studios](#), located downtown at 820 Monroe. There Berry assists with art framing services by managing the moulding orders and inventory, in addition to building custom frames.

Berry's decision to stay in the area after his graduation was influenced by the vibrancy of the area. "I'm definitely excited about living in GR," says Berry. "As a city, I think Grand Rapids has a lot of momentum -- in music, in art, in food."

Berry has played a notable role in that vibrancy, exhibiting his work at a number of regional festivals and showcases, including the [Grand Rapids' Festival Regional Art Competition](#) three of the last four years, the Avenue for the Arts Exhibition and Showcase at Forest Hills Fine Arts Center in 2008, and the Art Around Town auction and fundraiser at the Kindel Furniture Co. that same year.

As a member of the Avenue for the Arts, Berry has helped to host a number of art-advancement events by the community, such as its Spring for the Arts and Fall for the Arts, as well as routinely showcasing his paintings at its monthly Artists' Streetmarket, though Berry believes he's ready to look for more permanent exposure for his art.

"I'm looking for a solo exhibition somewhere in the city," says Berry. "I think my work has reached that level where it could be sustainable income -- though I like my work and I love building frames. It's stable. It makes for a tricky scenario, thinking about putting my works in a gallery now."

A similar aesthetic runs through all of Berry's works, both large and small. Supervised chaos is one way to describe it and the unique artistic process that gets him there; disordered order is another.

In addition to the 3-D paintings dotting his shelves, Berry has a number of 2-D paintings resting about his studio, including his intended 2010 ArtPrize entry, a 16-square-foot canvas teeming hypnotically with inky curlicues, dichromatic ovals and aimless rivulets.

Though he calls these paintings "2-D," Berry applies so much paint to the concentric circles that they become elevated. Laid flat, the canvases resemble the topography of some Dr. Seuss-like countryside, a land of nubby hillocks and meandering lagoons. Berry started on this particular piece in the spring of 2009 -- and he's not done yet.

"It's a result of the convergence of two processes," explains Berry. "One emphasizes chance and the other emphasizes control. The first layer of my painting is the chance operation where I apply a very liquid paint in an arbitrary way and use gravity to let the paint interact and form its own foundation. Then I undertake a very controlled, very deliberate process of adding concentric circles."

Also on the shelves in Berry's studio apartment, among his 3-D paintings, memorabilia, and other books, stand two highly influential works of theoretical physics: Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" and Brian Greene's "The Elegant Universe."

"My work is very much influenced by theories in physics. You see, the main problem now in physics is to unify the existing theories about both ends of the universe, the microscopic and the macroscopic," Berry says.



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"The problem is, at the microscopic level, quantum mechanics describes the very small as completely unpredictable, wild, ruled by chance, unimaginable, whereas at the macroscopic level, general relativity describes the very large as predictable, knowable, almost controllable. And I think there's a parallel between that tension and the tension in my work."

The unapparent irony is that Berry's frenetic creations begin with meditation. "I use breathing as a source to create an image," Berry says. In a meditative way, I would draw a line or paint a drop with every breath, and fill an image that way. It's about the deep concentration. It's calming and therapeutic for me, and the meaning my art is in the very process."

As for the dichromatic nature of his art, Berry contends he has no beef with color. "I love the simplicity of black and white, the using of positive and negative, and the philosophical idea that reality and all perception is just a play between the two, the firing of our synapses telling us 'yes' or 'no' to everything, similar to the way binary systems work."

Though even Berry's two pets, a pair of rabbits, come only in black and white.

Mitchell Terpstra is a freelance writer, landscaper, and house-remodeler who lives in Grand Rapids' Baxter neighborhood

**Photos:**

Joel Berry (3)

Joel Berry artwork (3)

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