

Art

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Marvelous Melvin

Brother Mel makes his annual artistic pilgrimage to The Arts Company in Nashville
by [John Pitcher](#)

Brother Mel

The Arts Company, through July 27

Back in the late 1940s, a young high school grad named Melvin Meyer was working a dead-end job at his father's water pump company when a friend approached him with an intriguing idea. Why shouldn't the two of them become priests?

"I thought that was an interesting idea, so I went ahead and became a Marianist brother," says Meyer. "My friend quickly forgot about the idea, got married and ended up having 16 children. I've been telling him ever since that half of those kids are rightfully mine."



Marianist Meets Matisse *"Still Life With Guitar"*

Meyer, who for the past 60 years has gone by the name Brother Mel, may not have conceived any biological children, but he's nonetheless given birth to thousands of works of art. About a hundred of those pieces—watercolors, oil paintings, sculptures and metal works—will be on display at The Arts Company through July 27.

"We've been showing Brother Mel's work here for the past eight years, and the reason we keep having him back is that he's not like anyone else in the art world," says Arts Company owner Anne Brown. "He was never interested in achieving stardom or acclaim in the arts establishment, and so he was always able to focus on just being himself."

So what exactly is the essence of Brother Mel's artistic self? When asked to describe his style, the soft-spoken yet loquacious monk, who turned 79 on Tuesday, fell silent at first, but then offered: "I'm not really sure that I have a style, other than to say my work is always changing."

Actually, Brother Mel seems to have a lot of different styles. Works such as his “Still Life With Guitar,” a brightly colored acrylic on canvas, call to mind the paintings of Henri Matisse. His painted steel “Red Stack of Shapes,” on the other hand, is reminiscent of the abstract angularity of Wassily Kandinsky, while some of his portraits—of friends, fellow monks and of himself—are pure pop art.



The Gospel According to Mel “*Last Supper*”

There is at least one common thread running through Brother Mel’s work, though, and that’s his penchant to recycle everyday odds and ends into art, giving debris and other junk a resurrection, if you will.

One of his most imaginative works, a decorative bowl, is made entirely of metal bolts. Similarly, he fashioned a sculpture of the “Last Supper” out of railroad spikes and crucifixes out of bits of discarded metal. (Not surprisingly, this artist’s most inspired and original artworks almost always have religious themes.)

“I don’t like to waste things,” says the brother, who apparently never met a piece of scrap metal that he didn’t want to paint and hang on a wall.

If Brother Mel’s work seems at all, well, unorthodox, it’s probably because his arts background was unconventional. Born in Florissant, Mo., on June 5, 1928, Brother Mel didn’t give art a thought until he was already a student at the University of Dayton, where he was studying to become an English and history teacher for the Marianist order.



Proving His Metal *“Red Stack of Shapes”*

But a couple of Brother Mel’s college buddies were studying art and suggested he take up watercoloring—amazingly, much of this brother’s life has been determined by such serendipitous encounters with friends. Before he knew it, the young Marianist had the visual arts bug.

Brother Mel eventually got a master’s degree in art from the University of Notre Dame in 1960. But his real education took place three years earlier, when he toured Europe on a moped. “I traveled 14,000 miles and toured nine countries in one year,” he says. “And I saw everything.”

In recent years, Brother Mel has become such a busy artist that he now employs three people at his studio in Kirkwood, Mo., to help keep up with demand. He has created artwork for such places as the Barnes Jewish Hospital and the Children’s Hospital in St. Louis, Mo. He’s also created major public sculptures for the Savvis Center (now the Scottrade Center) in St. Louis and for various public parks in Missouri and elsewhere.

As for the future, Brother Mel plans a trip this summer to Arizona, where he will spend three weeks creating watercolors of that state’s great desert vistas. And he’s already looking forward to holding another show in Nashville in 2008.

“Next year I turn 80, so I’ll finally be old enough for a retrospective,” he says.