

mental_floss

8 Artists Who Poured Their Heart and Soul Into Their Work (Also: Their Blood and Urine)

by Rob Lammle - November 29, 2011 - 11:30 PM

All artists put a little bit of their soul into every piece. But these artists put their soul – and a whole lot more – into their art.

1. Hair and Nails



When Hananuma Masakichi learned he was dying of tuberculosis, he wanted to give his girlfriend a way to remember him. So he constructed a life-sized and startlingly realistic statue of himself using thousands of strips of wood – some reports say between 2,000 and 5,000 strips, others say as many as 20,000. The strips are held together by glue, dovetail joints, or wooden pegs, and fits so precisely that no seams are visible across the whole figure.

During the construction, Masakichi even sacrificed pieces of his own body to help his wooden doppelganger come to life. He not only pulled out his own fingernails and toenails to attach to the statue, he also allegedly yanked his own teeth for the figure's mouth. He then painstakingly drilled tiny holes, one for each of his pores, and plucked the corresponding hair from his body to glue it into the same pore on the statue. Yes, he even did this with the hairs under his loincloth.

Masakichi finished his statue in 1885 and put it on display. He stood next to the statue in the same pose, and many viewers couldn't tell which was the real man and which was made out of wood. Sadly, it was all for naught. The girlfriend left him, he never made any real money from the statue, and some reports say that when he finally died 10 years later, it wasn't even from TB; apparently he received a bad diagnosis.

When Robert Ripley began collecting the world's oddities in the 1930s, Masakichi's statue was one of the first items he acquired, paying a San Francisco saloon-owner \$10 for it. Among the hundreds of items Ripley owned over the years, Masakichi's statue was one of his favorites, often displayed in his museums and even in his own home.

2. Bloody Good Art (#1)

Van Gogh painted some famous self-portraits. Frida Kahlo painted herself into many of her own pieces. Even Leonardo da Vinci drew a nice rendition of himself. But none of those artists have taken self-portraiture to the extreme of Britart star Marc Quinn, with his series of sculptures known as Self. Starting in 1991 and continuing once every five years until 2006, Quinn took a mold of his entire head and then cast it in nearly five liters of his own blood, which he drained over a period of about five months. The blood sculptures are quite fragile and have to be stored in special refrigeration units that keep each head at 10°F (-12°C) to prevent melting.

The first Self was purchased by one of the Britart movement's biggest early supporters, Charles Saatchi, who paid £13,000 for it. There were rumors that the sculpture had melted in 2003 while Saatchi was having his kitchen remodeled – probably to please his wife, celebrity chef Nigella Lawson. He proved those rumors untrue when he sold Self for £1.5 million in 2005 to an American collector. The final version, Self IV, is on display at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

3. Bloody Good Art (#2)

All artists suffer for their art, but Lani Beloso has made her suffering into art instead. Beloso has menorrhagio, a condition that causes her to have very heavy, very painful menstrual cycles. Wishing to make her suffering worth something, she began collecting her menstrual flow every month and used it for a series of 13 paintings, representing a year's worth of menstrual cycles, which she called The Period Piece.

For her follow-up, 2nd Period, Beloso has encased her art in two sheets of plexiglass like a slide ready to go under the microscope. The painting is then hung away from the wall so that light shines through, casting an image, creating a second work of art.

4. Urine Trouble

Few pieces of art have evoked emotions like Andres Serrano's 1987 Immersion (Piss Christ). The photo depicts a plastic crucifix that is submerged in a glass container filled with what Serrano claims is his urine. Serrano intended the piece to be a statement on the commercialism of religion and a reflection on the way Christian symbols are treated in America. Of course this is not how everyone – especially Christians – interpret the work.

After the photo was unveiled in 1989, it was met with a flurry of controversy. The heat grew when it was discovered that Serrano had received \$15,000 from the publicly funded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Politicians were outraged that tax dollars had paid for art from Serrano and other controversial artists who many of their constituents found blasphemous. They moved to have the NEA's funds revoked, but were ultimately unsuccessful. As a compromise, the NEA no longer provides money to individual artists, but instead supports art projects that take into consideration "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public."

Since its debut, prints of *Piss Christ* have been occasionally attacked by protesters. In 1997, after a failed attempt by the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Australia, to have the photo removed from an exhibit, the photo was smashed by two teens with a hammer. Most recently, in April 2011, members of a French Christian group also took a hammer to the piece, and then used a sharp object to deface the photo. Instead of taking the photo down or closing the exhibit, the gallery reopened the next day with the damaged photo in place “so people can see what barbarians can do.”

5. Really Crappy Art



Many artists find family members are their harshest critics. Such was the case for Italian artist Piero Manzoni, whose father declared, “Your work is shit.” With his father’s words as inspiration, Manzoni decided to make a statement about the art world’s willingness to buy anything as long as it’s been signed by a famous artist. To that end, Manzoni filled 90 tin cans with his own excrement. This must have made the old man proud, considering the senior Manzoni owned a canning factory. The artist then sealed the tins, signed them, and printed a number on each one, indicating its number in the limited series. The tins were called *Merda d’artista*, or Artist’s Shit.

Manzoni sold each tin, which weighed about 30 grams (or just over an ounce), for the going-rate of gold, allowing the price to fluctuate with the precious metals market. At the time, in 1961, his tins sold for about \$37 each; in today’s market, they’d go for about \$1800. But, as if to prove his point, the tins currently sell for many times that at auction. The Tate Modern Art Museum in London spent £22,300 for one of the tins in 2000. Just seven years later, one sold at Sotheby’s for €124,000.

Merda d’artista was part of a series by Manzoni, including *Fiato d’artista*, or Artist’s Breath – balloons filled from his own lungs. He also planned to make *Sangue d’artista*, or Artist’s Blood, but that project never got off the ground. Maybe he just wasn’t willing to bleed for his art.

6. Is That Hair Gel?



Marcel Duchamp is best-known for his “Readymade” art projects, as well as a definitive Cubist piece, *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*. However, he is also well-known for *Paysage fautive*, or *Faulty Landscape* (some prefer *Wayward Landscape*), created in 1946 as a gift for Maria Martins, a woman he loved but could not have. The piece (at left) consists of a Plexiglas-like sheet called *Astralon*, backed with black velvet, and mounted in a simple wooden frame. It wasn't until 1989 that the art world's suspicions were confirmed by genetic testing: the “paint” used for the piece is in fact Duchamp's own seminal fluid

7. Nope. Not Hair Gel.

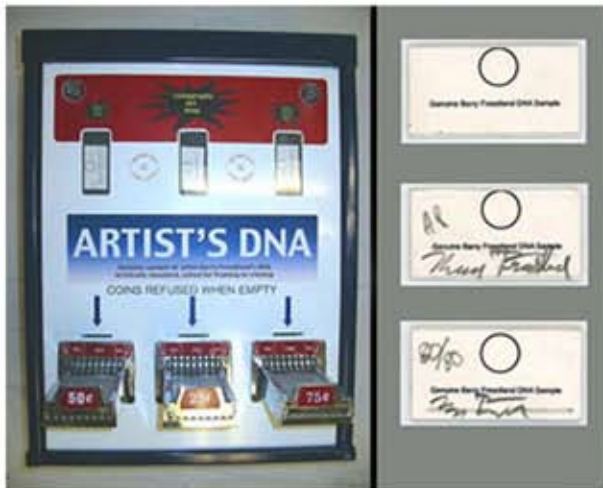


Although Duchamp might have pioneered this most unusual medium, he was not the last. German artist Martin von Ostrowski's most ambitious (and undoubtedly tiring) work to date has been a series of 30 self-portraits that he has painted with his own semen.

This isn't Ostrowski's only example of using his body for artwork – he is also famous for using his own feces to paint portraits of Hitler and other German leaders.

8. Limited Edition DNA

For many artists, the most personal stamp they put on a piece is their signature. Barry Freedland, on the other hand, uses his identity to create most of his art. Freedland has designed, built, and programmed robots that can draw beautiful, complex shapes by repeatedly stamping out a copy of his thumbprint. He has also equipped bots with a plaster cast of his own hand holding a graphite pencil, so even though he's not technically drawing the artwork, he still has his "hand" in the proceedings. But perhaps most interesting of all is Freedland's work with his own DNA.



His Battle of Barry Pills is a large pharmaceutical container filled to the brim with small plastic pills. Inside each pill is a photo of the artist, as well as a sample of his DNA. If you want something more collectible for your money, you can also buy not lithographs, but "lickographs" – small cards that Freedland has licked, thus passing on his DNA. The cards are sold from a stamp vending machine (at left) and are available in three different versions: 25 cents buys you a simple DNA sample; 50 cents buys you a signed DNA sample card; and for 75 cents, you'll have your very own signed, limited edition sample.