“Outdoor museums” display David Fichter’s murals.

by JULIA HANNA

It’s the most unlikely of galleries—a concrete retaining wall in the shadow of Interstate 93, just outside Boston. But David Fichter ’73 is a full-time muralist. His work (davidfichter.net) appears in school cafeterias and train stations. It overlooks parking lots and playgrounds. Brick walls are his canvas and his preferred surface (for their “urban texture”), although he’s also painted on cinder block, stucco, Sheetrock, and the panels of multiple density overlay (MDO; specially treated wood impregnated with resin) that make up the Mystic River Mural Project. Begun in 1996, with a section added each summer by Fichter and a group of a dozen or so local teens, the mural depicts the life of the river in his trademark teeming, cornucopia-like style, with so many layers of distance and perspective that the effect is nearly three-dimensional. Recently, a panel had to be restored after an encounter with a speeding car—one of the hazards when your museum is outdoors.
Early on, Fichter, a fine-arts concentrator who studied set design with Franco Colavecchia, experimented with different artistic styles and painted political posters (he turned his Lowell House dorm room into a silk-screening studio during the 1973 graduate-student strike). Then a friend told him to visit Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco’s Epic of American Civilization at Dartmouth College’s Baker Library. Fichter subsequently traveled throughout Latin America, where murals have a rich history as a form of social commentary. “Murals have always spoken to me as a way to push change in society without shoving it down people’s throats,” he says. “What I like is that people can find their way in—they feel empowered when they participate in the process or see themselves or their stories represented in public.”

There was no place to study mural painting formally, but a contact with Victor Canifru, a Chilean muralist living in Nicaragua, opened the door to Fichter’s first commission, at a school in Managua. And then? “I was hooked,” he says. He’s now completed more than 200 projects, the majority in Massachusetts, although his work has also taken him to locales like Wayne, Michigan (an historical mural of the city’s deep connections to the automotive industry), and Madison, Wisconsin (a mural on the study of water science for the University of Wisconsin).

With an approach that blends the personal and public, Fichter generally works with neighborhood organizations or public officials to determine a work’s overall design, a process that can involve a fair amount of give and take. On average, the lifespan of a project from start to finish is about one year. “I like to do work that comes out of lived experience,” he says—which involves gathering oral histories and spending time in the community. “There’s always a negotiation between ideas and images,” he adds. “Weaving in my own story and connections helps inspire me.”

In Sunday Afternoon on the Charles, for example, a commission for the Trader Joe’s grocery store on Memorial Drive in Cambridge, Fichter can point out friends, neighbors, and his neighbor’s beagle, Tyler. A blonde, straw-hatted toddler eating a peach separates a colorful Cambridge present from a black-and-white Harvard Square of the past; the toddler is Fichter’s younger daughter, Olivia Wise, now 19 years old. A young girl with a bow in her hair in the black-and-white section is his “muse” and neighbor Suzanne Green, a lifelong Cantabrigian who will turn 99 this year.

The world of muralists is relatively small and familial, with plenty of information shared on the technical aspects of paint (which brands and colors best survive the elements) and the ins and outs of surface preparation. “There’s a conservationist aspect to it,” says Fichter. “If a wall is painted, I try to find out what’s already on there to see how it will react with what I’m planning to add.” An outdoor mural usually requires a touch-up after 15 years or so. One of Fichter’s oldest pieces is Bread and Roses (1985), for the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

After determining the general design, Fichter makes a scaled drawing on paper and overlays it with a numbered grid (typically, one inch to one foot) that he uses as a guide when painting. “It becomes abstract,” he says. “I don’t think, ‘I’m working on an eye.’ You can really get lost.” For an indoor mural, he may make a transparency of an image, project that onto the wall, and paint from there. Sometimes he listens to history books on tape as he works—he finds music too distracting.

The fishbowl aspect of working in the public eye often leads to serendipitous encounters. One day, a local resident wearing an EAT T-shirt wandered by and asked to be included in a commission for Cambridge’s Area 4 Neighborhood Coalition. It was the perfect impromptu
Photograph by Jim Rinaldi

Vocals, Guitar, and Stethoscope
Suzie Brown, M.D., writes prescriptions—and love songs.

In her song “Nice Girl,” cardiologist–singer–songwriter Suzie Brown, M.D. ’02, declares in a honey-dipped twang, “Sooner or later you’ll find out that sometimes/ I wanna scream and yell and run like hell and/ play it really loud/ So think twice before you come my way/ I ain’t always such a nice girl.” Like many of the bluesy, country-rock songs on Heartstrings, Brown’s first full-length album, “Nice Girl” is ostensibly a reproof to a composite of lovers who didn’t quite get the sultry, determined girl. But it also serves as a reminder to herself: for all her success as a Harvard Medical School graduate, Brown doesn’t feel whole until she breaks free from the hospital and jumps on stage with a guitar.

The lesson took Brown, 37, a while to learn. For more than a decade she committed herself to becoming a top research cardiologist. Then, in 2009, just as she was about to complete a grant proposal that would have funded her work into her forties, she decided she couldn’t ignore her musical desires any longer. She abandoned the grant for a part-time clinical job, treating patients with heart failure, and devoted the rest of her time to making and promoting her music. She says the decision felt reckless at first: “I think I was afraid to admit to myself that I didn’t want a high-powered academic career...even if I could have had it.”

Luckily, it didn’t take long for the move to pay off. Within a year Brown had attracted A-list producer Barrie Maguire (formerly the bassist for The Wallflowers and Natalie Merchant) and recorded Heartstrings, released this May. Today she works three days a week in the heart-failure clinic at Albert Einstein Medical Center outside Philadelphia, plays at least one show a week, and often finds herself up well into the night managing the logistics of her burgeoning music career.

Growing up in the Boston suburb of Natick, Brown always had a native voice. In 2001, she was the only chords she knew. The experience was cathartic. “I just felt like, ‘Oh my god, I wrote a song,’ and it was about love and loneliness,” she recalls. Putting her emotions front and center was a radical departure from the stoic disposition she’d learned to maintain as a doctor. “My life over the last decade had been about putting the patient first,” she explains. “I also felt that, as a woman trying to be a cardiologist, I had to be tough, I had to not show my emotions.

As her workload eased, the desire to sing crept back in. That fall, in the aftermath of a romantic breakup, Brown wrote her first song. “I just figured, ‘If I can’t write a song when I’m feeling like this, I will never in my life write a song,’” she says now. She wrote it in one night, in the key of G—because those were the only chords she knew. The experience was cathartic. “I just felt like, ‘Oh my god, I wrote a song,’ and it was about love and loneliness,” she recalls. Putting her emotions front and center was a radical departure from the stoic disposition she’d learned to maintain as a doctor. “My life over the last decade had been about putting the patient first,” she explains. “I also felt that, as a woman trying to be a cardiologist, I had to be tough, I had to not show my emotions.

Visit harvardmag.com/ extras to hear tracks from Brown’s CD.