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HerbalEGram: Volume 6, Number 8, August 2009

Tea: An Artist's Medium

Millions of people around the world drink tea (*Camellia sinensis*). The beverage is sipped for a variety of reasons, including its many tastes, medicinal properties, and ability to produce a soothing calm or gentle energy. Interestingly, many of the pleasures tea brings its drinkers, tea can also bring to art.

Artist Jeffrey Axelrod stands in the kitchen of his San Francisco home with dozens of clear jars of brewed teas lining the table. Each jar contains 4-5 tea bags or heaps of loose leaf tea and less than one inch of water to make the teas as concentrated as possible. If the tea is watered down, every color looks the same once absorbed by the canvass, and Axelrod, who uses these teas to make art, needs vibrant variations of color.

"The thing I like most about the tea is that it has this warm organic feeling to it," said Axelrod (oral communication, July 9, 2009). "It doesn't matter if I put loose leaf in a jar or a tea bag—the end result is color."

The type of art [Axelrod](#) creates is called *assemblage*, which consists of a painted background covered by painted words and glued-on objects. The end result of many of his pieces is a whimsical, imaginative, and sometimes edgy collage of images, ideas, and emotions. Axelrod uses tea to paint many backgrounds and also uses tea to color the majority of some pieces.

"Everything I do always has tea in it," he said. "Tea is my love."

Axelrod begins by dipping a one-inch paintbrush into the jars to paint a soft and glowing background on a canvass. Sometimes he'll use 5 to 7 teas for the background and he has used up to 20 different teas in one piece.

Much of Axelrod's process of painting with tea is about experimentation, a likely reason he deems his kitchen a "laboratory." He mixes different teas to produce brighter colors, and sometimes mixes teas with watercolors or has objects soak in tea overnight before assembling them onto the background. Often, Axelrod doesn't know the exact color that will be produced—an aspect of painting with tea that he enjoys. He does know that most teas produce warm and neutral colors, and that some kinds are better than others.

"Russian chocolate tea is my best brown; hibiscus is my best purple," said Axelrod.

Many different kinds of tea from numerous locations around the world make up Axelrod's palette, which currently consists of about 80 teas. While he's not too particular about these, there are a few brands he avoids, and he prefers to buy organic teas.

Axelrod has shown his artwork in several California-based art festivals, including the popular Sausalito Art Festival. When observers learn that he uses tea in such a great deal of his work, many are surprised, he said.

Recently Axelrod entered a world much more accustomed to the wonders of tea. Last May, while exhibiting at the World Tea Expo in Las Vegas, NV, he met many people who were interested in his work. Since then, he has started creating some marketing art, such as labels and posters, for several tea companies, including Rishi Tea, ITO EN®, and Florapharm®.

"Tea people are so passionate about the industry and are such nice people," Axelrod said of the experience. "I really enjoy working within the industry. It's like finding a new home."

Soon Axelrod might be using herbs in his artwork. He plans to make teas out of some herbs that he purchased from an herb garden north of San Francisco.

"I'm going to play around with them. They're just so beautiful."

Though art made with tea is not common, other artists join Axelrod in their use of the herbal beverage for creative expression.

Austin Kleon, a writer/artist based in Austin, TX, uses tea to create [sketches](#) that jump-start his creative juices.

"Tea is for when I want to smoothly sail through the day," he said (e-mail, July 14, 2009). "Coffee is for when

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I want to hack through the jungle.”

On the mornings that Kleon opts for tea, he waits until his cup of tea has brewed, and then drops the tea bag on an index card, which produces an unexpected variety of blobs, blurs, and smears.¹ He then hunts for images in the tea stains and creates sketches using a black Sharpie® felt pen. He got the idea from a fellow writer/artist, who got the idea from Dave Gray, the founder of the consulting and design firm XPLANE.

“I really love the color, honestly,” said Kleon. “And it lends a kind of earthy, organic feel to line drawings.”

Many of Kleon’s tea sketches end up depicting light-hearted scenes, such as a “fat kid dancing,” or another with people floating away in hot air balloons. Sometimes he will incorporate a process he learned from another artist’s blog, which involves dividing the piece of paper or note card into a grid of panels, which he then uses to create cartoon narratives.²

“Not-knowing what image will show up is part of the game,” said Kleon. “You get to let your subconscious take over. It’s like a Rorschach inkblot test. You could show the tea stain to 100 different people, and they’d see 100 different images.”

Similar to Axelrod and Kleon, [Michele Brody](#) uses tea to produce visual imagery. While doing this, she also actively explores, and engages others to explore, the emotions, experiences, and memories associated with drinking tea.

For the 2007 D.U.M.B.O. Art Under the Bridge Festival in Brooklyn, NY, Brody created a 3-day public installation in which she served passers-by cups of tea from a food cart.³ While sharing this tea with strangers, Brody recorded their conversations and then transcribed their words onto the dried paper tea bags stained with vibrant purples, browns, and yellows. Later, the tea bags were mounted side-by-side to make a quilt of sorts, and similar installations were later featured at the Brenda Taylor Gallery and Lower East Side Tenement Museum, both in New York. (More photos of the Museum’s installation are available [here](#).)

“It’s really about creating this private space within the public realm where people come in, who are strangers, and share a cup of tea with me,” said Brody (oral communication, July 16, 2009).

Like many of Brody’s other creations, most of which also use organic materials like handmade paper or wheat grass seeds, the idea behind her tea projects is to sensitize people to time and how memories are stored, forgotten, and modified as time passes. She also intends for the installation to capture how a process that occurs over time can affect materials, as well as the process of oral histories and storytelling. In this case, the tea stains that are left behind on the bag serve as tangible images of the memories and experiences associated with drinking and sharing tea.

While aiming to look at how tea intertwines with all of these aspects, Brody doesn’t ignore the visual art that the beverage creates on its own.

“In and of themselves, the tea stains on the bags are just beautiful,” she said. “It’s imagery that I could never create in and of my own as a painter. I wanted to incorporate these beautiful objects with the memory of sharing.”

While a few people who stopped by her cart did not want to engage in conversation (this is New York, Brody reminds), many were quite open. Some spoke about the memory of drinking tea as a child when sick or drinking tea while traveling. Others shared their personal opinions toward tea, discussed technical definitions of tea, or explored why the United States does not have a deep tradition of drinking tea common in many other countries.

“We are a country that many people bring many, many practices to,” she said of immigrants who have brought tea customs to the United States, adding that she thinks the country is experiencing a revitalization of tea drinking.

Another inspiration for Brody’s tea projects has come from books that portray the common custom of offering tea to people as a welcoming gesture. Recently Brody read Rory Stewart’s *The Places in Between*, a memoir about the author, who is Scottish, traveling on foot across Afghanistan in 2002.⁴ Stewart was often made to feel welcome by strangers who offered him tea, Brody said.

“It intrigued me how tea is such a binder,” she said of its ability to cross borders, histories, and religions. “Tea is so much more than just a beverage.”

More contemporary tea art by a variety of artists is available by visiting the tea sketches group on the interactive photo-sharing Web site Flickr.

—Lindsay Stafford

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