

ENLIVENED SKYLINE

MIKE BERRY

Capturing the colors of the town

Mike Berry's art is good for Knoxville. But he isn't all that interested in PR work. He's just an artist who loves painting his city. He is inspired by what he calls the life force of downtown. He will see an image, a contrast of color, and then paints it in a rich style that magnifies his subject matter. His paintings breathe life into downtown with their colorful style and impressionistic images. Berry's work is unintentionally yet inevitably good press for the downtown movement. And Berry is just fine with that.

"I like for my work to go beyond me," says Berry. "I live downtown and I love it. That love goes hand-in-hand with the artwork."

An unexpected admirer noticed amplified style: Pilot Oil. Their appreciation for the way Berry portrayed Knoxville eventually lead to a progressive advertising campaign fueled by the artist's bright style.

Now, that style hangs for all to see, big and bright, on billboards all over town, the partnership a symbol of how an artist can work within the community's business framework.

BY J. BRANDON LOWE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
JEFF EDWARDS



## HOW DID YOU END UP TEAMING WITH PILOT?

Pilot was trying to figure out a creative new way to promote their coffee and my friend Mark Franklin, at Franklin Advertising, came up with the concept. He likes my work and suggested using it to create a campaign that would brand their coffee in a different way.

## WHAT'S IT BEEN LIKE TO SEE YOUR ART ON BILLBOARDS ALL OVER?

It's been interesting. I'll drive by and just think, "That is so weird to see my painting so big up there."

## WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST SURPRISE ON THIS PROJECT?

What's funny is that when I unveiled the final illustration, there was this long pause and it made me really nervous. Then Dan Flemming, said "I just have one suggestion: Your signature is not big enough." He pointed out that when the painting went from 11x24 to a billboard, my signature would be really small. He told me that Pilot supports local art and wants people to know that the artist was local.

## EXPLAIN THE CONCEPT?

Dan Flemming is really trying to connect the company with the community. That is why you see the Knoxville skyline in the painting. He wanted people to immediately recognize that. People have overwhelmingly supported it. They think it is cool that Pilot would do this.

## HOW HAVE PEOPLE RESPONDED?

People usually pull one of two things from my work. It either takes them back to a time when Knoxville's downtown was booming. Or people say that I'm looking to the future of what Knoxville can be. I've learned that people in Knoxville just love their city. Even people who don't live downtown will say, "I love how you've captured my city." It gives them a little bit of ownership, and that's exciting to see.

## WHERE IS THE KNOXVILLE ART SCENE HEADED?


As residents' move downtown, more galleries and art shops will open. Also, public works of art and events that have to do with the arts are going to continue to grow. Maybe I have on downtown blinders because I am here every day, but I really think it has a lot to do with First Fridays. It's a big night once a month where people come out to support local art. It's a great way to promote both your art and downtown. Over the past three years it has grown tremendously.

## WHAT ABOUT DOWNTOWN ART?

Downtown has changed a lot. It's not like it used to be. There are movie theaters, gift stores and great places to eat. But the number one thing I get is people walking into the gallery and saying, "Wow, I didn't know this was here." There are three or four galleries right here on this block.

## WHAT'S IT LIKE AS A WORKING ARTIST IN KNOXVILLE?

An artist that really believes in their work can get plugged in here and live and thrive. My own success has come because the community has embraced my work.



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BEYOND ME