



EGG-CENTRIC ART

BY SUSAN BRACKNEY

Paul "Eggman" Wirhun saves the world with his mad egg-batik skills.

★ Put any stock in an ancient Ukrainian myth, and technically, Paul Wirhun is saving the world, one egg at a time.

According to the Ukrainian-American artist, it was once believed that our fate depended solely on the crafting of *pysanky* (pronounced PISS-ahn-kih) — those decorative and highly symbolic batiked eggs for which the Ukraine is so well known. As the story goes, an evil monster lives chained to a cliff, and because this monster is pacified seemingly only by *pysanky*, he sends his servants out annually to count the number of eggs decorated in the villages and surrounding countryside.

"If there are a lot made, then his chains are kept tight and love abounds everywhere, but if only a few are made, his chains are loosened and evil flows. And if the practice should ever cease, he will be released from his chains, and the world will be devoured," Wirhun explains.

At the craft since he was 10, Wirhun originally learned the egg batik basics from his mother. By age 30, he began implementing his own etching, dyeing, and brushing techniques to create elaborate world maps, eerie skulls, erotic scenes, and more on eggs of every size and shape. Although Wirhun has strayed from tradition, his *pysanky* are designed to serve as talismans just as their ancient counterparts were.

That Old-Time Religion

Often referred to as Ukrainian Easter eggs, *pysanky* were around long before Christ showed up. *Pysanky* comes from the word "pysaty," which means "to

write." Its practitioners have been "writing" designs with beeswax on eggs and subsequently resist-dyeing them in myriad bold colors for at least the last 3,000 years. "What you're dealing with is a neolithic, agrarian cultural mindset that is using an object out of its world for power," Wirhun says.

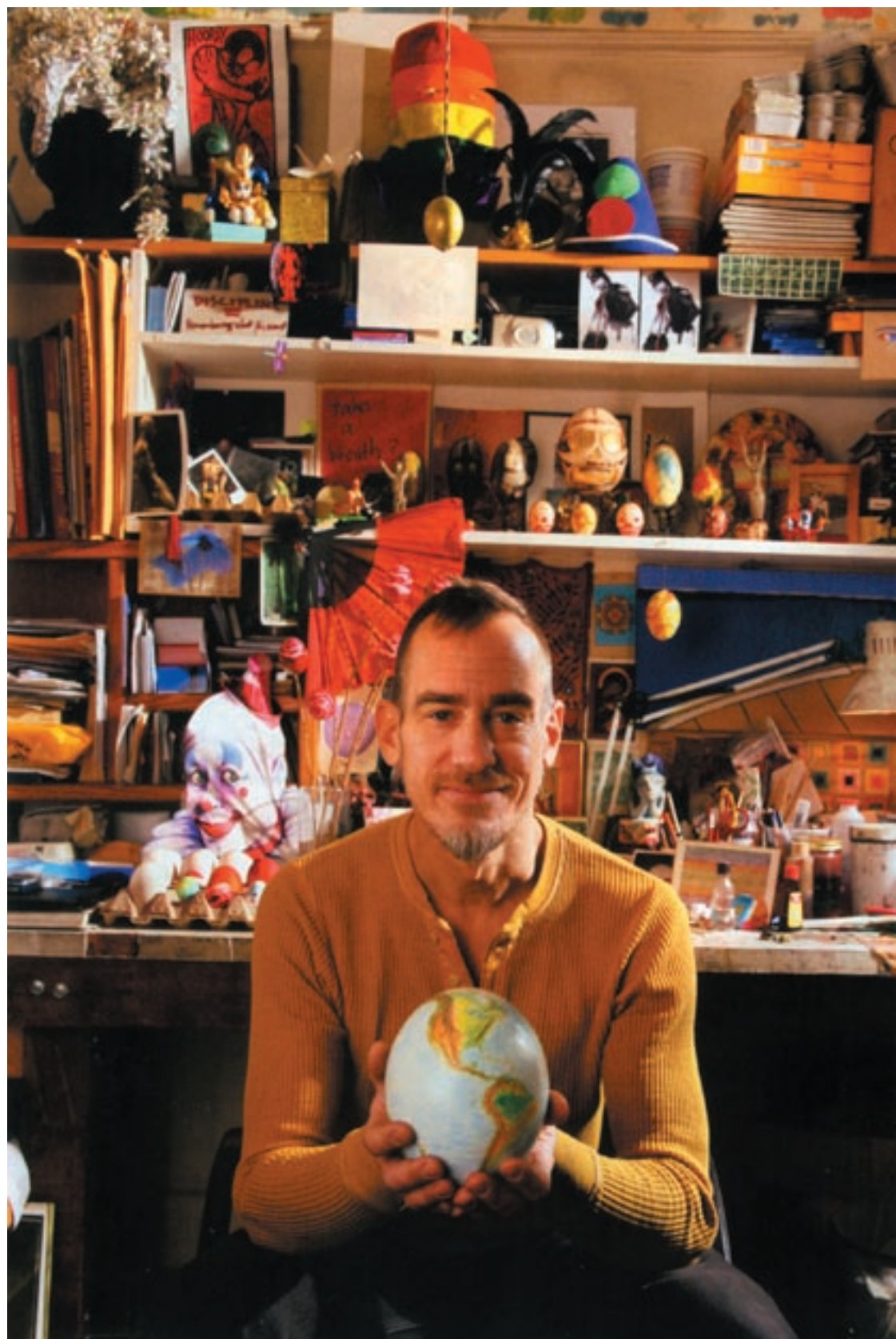
To harness the power inherent in them, only fertile eggs were used, and their contents were left intact. "The phenomenon of the decoration is a belief, first of all, that the egg has power in itself. With the decoration of an egg, you are basically ascribing the intention for how you will use the power which is inherently already in the egg," he adds.

For instance, eggs decorated with reindeer signified wishes for good health and prosperity. Those depicting chickens signified wishes for female fertility. Wirhun continues, "You are supposed to give [eggs designed with] ladders to old people for their ascent into heaven. Spirals just represent eternity itself."

Can so much power really be ascribed to the everyday egg? Yes, Wirhun says, even now: "The egg still holds its symbolic power for people even in our postmodern culture. It's one of the few symbols from civilization thousands of years ago that still retains its value."

As if to prove his point, Wirhun developed *The Skull Project*, an art ritual designed to commemorate all of those killed in Iraq in 2003. Using his own scratching and bleach painting techniques, Wirhun and a multi-

★ As well as saving the world, Wirhun holds the world in his hands — this time in the form of batiked ostrich egg.







tude of volunteers transformed intact eggs into macabre skulls, which were then piled in the cemetery yard of St. Mark's Church in the Bowery in New York.

"The interesting irony was that I took the symbol of life and fused it with the symbol of death. The paradox created a certain kind of emotional tension that made *The Skull Project* a potent piece of public art," he says. Wirhun hopes to resurrect *The Skull Project* on a national scale next fall.

Buddhas, Demons, and Saints

Further breaking with tradition, the rest of Wirhun's work is much less ephemeral. Because some of his pieces fetch as much as \$1,000 each, his clients expect them to last. As such, Wirhun uses blown-out eggs and finishes them with several coats of lacquer. From bold, batiked depictions of Mary, the Buddha, and assorted saints to his scratched and gilded "shooting cock" talismans, his methods and subject matter range widely.

To make such variety possible, Wirhun uses eggs from chickens, ducks, geese, emu, rhea, and ostriches. "Every different type of egg has a different texture, and, even within the same type of egg, no two eggs are alike," he notes. In the case of an ornately etched image of the crucifixion of Christ — a delicate design in pale greens and gold — Wirhun's hands never touch dye. "That is an emu shell. All the colors that you see, aside from the gold that I applied to it afterward, are the tones of the shell itself. I created the image through wax-etching the

★ Shown clockwise from top left: Wirhun's heavily lacquered demons glower, a pile of "Skullys" evokes the mass graves of Iraq, and, almost sculptural, this deeply shaded visage inspires calm.

shell in a vinegar bath, and the deeper you go into an emu shell, the lighter the tone gets," he says.

On the other end of the design spectrum you'll even find erotic pysanky. Inspired by classic Greek pottery, Wirhun creates striking scenes of male potency by reversing the traditional dyeing process: "You're supposed to go from lightest to darkest color in the traditional dyeing pattern, and with this, I was kind of mixing it up. The erotica that I've done is all batiking, but it's batiking of a different type."

Lately compelled by Tibetan influences, Wirhun's been experimenting with yet another design style. "I'm doing new skulls that have these crazy eyes that go in different directions. They kind of look like they're laughing, and they also have these arched eyebrows, so they look clownish, and they are very expressive." Wirhun is gushing now, happy to carry an ancient tradition into modernity. And, he admits, it's a good thing, too: "Isn't this brilliant? Here we are, spreading this information so that the world is saved!" ✕

► Try creating your own pysanky by following the DIY article on page 103.

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