

PASS THE CHEESECAKE BOYS - ARTIST PROFILE: PAUL RICHMOND

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

It takes a pretty special guy to get me into a Speedo, much more-so to get me out of it. But when Paul Richmond proposed the idea, I jumped at the chance to do it. After painting the skin-baring wardrobe malfunctions of such gay luminaries as Mike Ruiz, Perez Hilton, Alec Mapa, and Ari Gold, Richmond had come to my attention with his "Cheesecake Boys" series – a group of gleefully gratuitous guys inadvertently baring their bodies.

According to Richmond, "The idea came from classic pin-up girl art, with one obvious update – boys! I never understood why Cheesecake Girls from the 40's and 50's had such a hard time keeping their clothes on while their male pin-up counterparts only seemed to disrobe by choice. Guys shouldn't be immune to all of those hazards! I believe that stray nails, curious pups, and gravity can just as easily conspire to rob a hunky fellow of his pants, and thus the Cheesecake Boys were born. I love the expression of mock embarrassment that was the hallmark of classic pin-up girl art, and it always cracks me up to depict men making those some faces as they accidentally expose their unmentionables. I've even had some celebrities get in on the fun."

"Mike Ruiz, Perez Hilton, Jack Mackenroth, Jesse Archer, Darryl Stephens, and other gaylebs have all been Cheesecake Boy models. They collaborated with me to brainstorm their wardrobe malfunction scenarios, posed for hilariously compromising reference photos, and offered input throughout the process. For example, Jesse Archer asked "Do I really have to be wearing underwear?" and Ari Gold recommended I add a little more bling to his belt. And of course the best is yet to come, because my next Cheesecake Boy subject is none other than Alan Ilagan himself! Get ready guys, because this one's going to be extra "cheeky!"

More on that collaboration when Richmond completes the piece. (For now I will just say it was an honor, nay, a thrill, to drop trou for such a talented artist.) While some artists struggle and strive with elaborate ways to tastefully present male nudity, Richmond tries a different tactic, using everyday settings and humor for much of his work.

"The ideas for my paintings come from many different places – my own personal experiences, song lyrics, conversations, movies. One of my Cheesecake Boy paintings was actually inspired by a trip to the grocery store where I witnessed an unlucky fellow stumbling to his car with both arms full of grocery bags and his pants plummeting dangerously low to the ground. I'm sure he'd be thrilled to know that moment was immortalized on canvas! I also get

inspired by looking at the work of other artists, either by scouring the internet or looking through art/illustration/design annuals at the bookstore. I like the boldness of advertising, the narrative qualities in children's book illustration, and the incredible diversity of contemporary fine artists. I'm sure all of these influences affect the decisions I make in my own work, and hopefully help me tell my story with a fresh, relatable voice."

Like many artists whose best-known work is lively, humorous, and exuberant, Richmond has a serious, darker alter-ego that produces more somber pieces – partly a result of his Catholic childhood. Catholicism has reared its guilt-ridden head in a number of histories, and it certainly played a role in Richmond's upbringing. As a former altar boy, I know exactly what Richmond is talking about when he recalls his childhood in a strict Catholic home. It's the sort of shame that one never really grows out of – it's always there, like some impossible-to-eradicate stain. It fades, and is sometimes forgotten, but it never goes completely away.

"I grew up in a small community called Grove City, just south of Columbus, Ohio," Richmond begins. "It's a pretty conservative area, and I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic schools. My dad took an early retirement from his job as a railroad engineer when I was very young so he could stay home and take care of my sister, Laura, and me while Mom worked as the president of a mortgage company. Just as my parents swapped the traditional gender roles of the time, Laura was all too happy to let me play with her Barbies and "girly" toys in exchange for my superhero action figures and racecars. My parents loved us very much, but I know they struggled with their desire for us to be a "normal" family. Me prancing around the house in a homemade Snow White costume singing "Someday My Prince Will Come" probably didn't help matters. But my parents were always very supportive of my artwork, and I am grateful I had a creative outlet during the difficult years ahead. In middle school and high school, my effeminate nature blossomed, and even though I was too repressed to consider the term "gay" in relation to myself, my classmates picked up on it quickly and made my life pretty miserable. At home, gay people were often referred to by my Rush Limbaugh-idolizing father as scapegoats for all of the world's problems, a concept that was echoed in my religion classes at school. Thus, I wouldn't allow myself to even consider the possibility of being a homosexual, despite the secret attraction I felt for other guys — and my rapidly multiplying collection of cassette tapes by my favorite divas. That doesn't mean I didn't know. I couldn't admit it on a conscious level, but deep down, I was aware that there was something about me that would deeply disappoint my parents, whom I wanted nothing more than to please. So I channeled my energy into excelling in other ways – I did really well in school, was active in my community and at church, and of course I took great pride in being seen as a talented artist. Despite the challenge of growing up gay in a conservative environment, I believe that the nurturing relationship I had with my parents helped shape the person I am today. I've always felt loved, and therefore, it was worth the extra effort to help educate my parents about homosexuality,

dispelling the myths that had filled them with fear. Prejudice is a lot easier when you're talking about an abstract concept or "those people," as opposed to someone in your own family. Over time and with a lot of work by everyone involved, my parents grew to completely accept their gay son - mostly by realizing that I'm still just their son after all."

Watching one's son prance around in princess garb singing 'Someday My Prince Will Come' is not what most parents envision as ideal – it is a testament to Richmond's own that they supported and loved him, and grew with him over the years. Still, those early days cannot have been easy for the boy, who sought out his own evolution through his art.

"Usually an idea for a painting, especially some of my more serious, introspective work, stems from something I go through myself or witness that moves me in a strong way. Art is how I attempt to make sense of my experiences and emotions. When I graduated from college and finally came out of the closet, I began a series of paintings about that process. At the time, I still wasn't out to my family and I had no intentions of ever showing those paintings to anyone. But my friend Melissa Forman saw them and encouraged me to submit them to some local juried shows and I began to realize that even though the subject matter came from a really personal place, other people could relate to what I had painted. They saw their own lives on the canvasses, and that motivated me to continue bringing personal narrative into my work and sharing it with others."

From an early age, Richmond was tough, resilient, and prolific when it came to producing artwork, and it went beyond the expression of his life – heretofore hidden – as a young gay man. Far more than his sexuality, his drive and determination as an artist is really what shaped him.

Richmond recounts the start of that artistic life: "My art training began when my parents needed a way to pry their three year old son's butt off the chair at the dining room table (where I sat cranking out two hundred drawings a day of my favorite fairy tale princesses). The answer — art class! Thankfully, the instructor they found, local artist Linda Regula, didn't squelch my childhood passion for art by overemphasizing the technical aspects of drawing. Instead, she brilliantly introduced these concepts while allowing me to paint subject matter that interested me. Many large oil paintings of Snow White and the Little Mermaid were produced over the next few years. When I became a teenager, Linda taught me how to use drawing and painting to tell my own story, and this proved to be my salvation during my challenging teenage years when I struggled with my sexuality, bullying, and overall self-image. After graduating from high school, I attended Columbus College of Art and Design where I studied illustration, painting, and animation. My original goal was to work for the Disney animation studio, but once I learned that being a Disney animator was a little more

technical and difficult than being a Disney princess, I shifted my focus. I discovered that telling stories on canvas, whether in an illustration class or a fine art studio, was really my passion. Even though it was exciting to be learning so much, the workload in college was tremendous and I was also doing a lot of freelance work outside of school, including painting large murals around town. I learned how to function on very little sleep, and how to juggle a tremendous amount of creative work without getting burnt out. These two skills have served me really well. I believe the key to becoming a successful artist is never giving up, never feeling beaten down despite how many rejections you receive, and never losing the belief that what you do matters. Art school was a good preparation for the challenging career I've chosen, but those early art classes with Linda were what really fueled my creative drive. Even today, every time I stand at my easel and start a new painting, I still feel like that little kid walking into her studio, overwhelmed with excitement by the unlimited possibilities literally at my fingertips."

A true artist finds resonance in all artistic avenues. As much as the visual arts spoke to Richmond – and as much as he spoke through them – he found equally compelling recognizance in other art forms.

"Some art exists solely as an object of beauty or an intellectual exercise while other pieces are created to document or share stories," he expounds. "I like to think at its best, art can challenge people to think and see the world differently. Shortly after graduating from college, when I was still in denial about being gay, I happened to read a short story called "Scordatura" by Mark Ray Lewis. It was about a gay man and was written in fourth person, so instead of using pronouns like "he" or "I," it said "you." After reading about this man and hearing the author say "you" over and over again, I realized that yes, it really was "me." Years of guilt, fear, and shame were eclipsed by one literary piece, and the next day I came out to my friend Melissa. Recently I received an e-mail from a man in his fifties living in a small, rural community. He said he had found my artwork online and it inspired him to finally admit that he is gay. I'll always cherish that e-mail, and all the comments I receive from people who feel a connection to my artwork. They are a testament to the important role art can play in bringing people together and sharing ideas."

Love and art go hand in hand as two of the things that make life worth living. For Richmond, they are also the two aspects of his life in which he takes the most pride. Listening as he talks of his partner is heart-warming and inspiring:

"I am proud that I have found my soulmate, Dennis, and have built a life with him rooted in mutual support of each other's goals. He just graduated last weekend with his MS in nursing. I'm so inspired by his ambitious nature and his fearlessness. Even though we have very different career paths, we both dream big and we're very driven. We've been together five and

a half years, and now that he has finished school, we are ready to begin making wedding plans. As far as my art career, I'm proudest of the fact that my work is genuine and honest. I would be painting the same things whether anyone was interested in buying them or not. This year, I achieved a big goal that I have been working toward for quite a while – getting signed by the Lyman-Eyer Gallery in Provincetown. I really respect the other artists they represent and their way of doing business, and I'm honored to have them carry my paintings and prints. Every day I wake up with new dreams and even though I've been working at this for a while now, I feel like my career is just getting started!"

Richmond has a lot more than Cheesecake on his plate at the moment, including several websites and new gallery representation.

"First I need to finish the piece on my easel, a painting called "Sanctuary" that depicts a figure escaping the outside world, retreating into his imaginary safe space. It was inspired by the recent LGBT teen suicides and my own reflections on childhood bullying. Along those lines, I've also been busy promoting a new anti-bullying website I launched recently with Linda Regula, my childhood art teacher. It's called the '**You Will Rise Project**', and it's a site dedicated to displaying artwork, stories, videos, poetry, music, and other creative expressions by people who have been or are currently being bullied. We aim to show people that even when bullies try to take it away, they still have a voice. I mentioned before, I'm now represented by the Lyman-Eyer Gallery, so I encourage everyone to also check out their website where many of my paintings are being offered exclusively as well as some limited-edition prints. You can also keep up with all of my new projects on my website and blog."

The life of a working artist is a busy and sometimes chaotic one. For someone who produces such humorous, emotionally-charged, and meaningful work – in all his endeavors – Richmond comes across as surprisingly grounded. It's one thing to be talented – it's quite another to match that talent with genuine kindness and a desire to better the world. To take the pain of one's past and turn it into something beautiful is the curse and blessing of the artist. Richmond takes on that mantle and, with his merry band of Cheesecake Boys, is poised to take on the world.