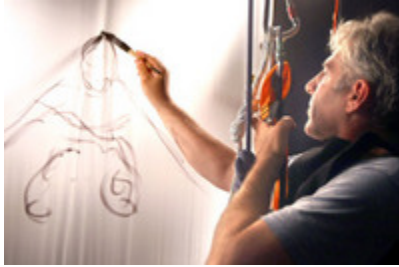


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Silk painter 'goes vertical'

From behind the 30-foot-tall expanse of taut white silk, Lee Zimmerman had the harnessed and accessorized look of a man set to wash the windows of a skyscraper.

By: **Christa Lawler**, Duluth News Tribune



Artist Lee Zimmerman creates a figure with quick brush strokes on a silk canvas while suspended in the air on a chair. (Bob King / rking@duluthnews.com)

From behind the 30-foot-tall expanse of taut white silk, Lee Zimmerman had the harnessed and accessorized look of a man set to wash the windows of a skyscraper. He wore a Velcro vest with bottles filled with dye, brushes and cups attached.

“I made it myself,” he said. “Yeah. I cut a hole in a big chunk of Velcro.”

The artist was seated on a small padded bench equipped with side saddles: a bucket on his left, a pocketed satchel to his right. Behind him, resident climbing expert Nick Fleming — the muscles of the operation — used a block and tackle to hoist the silk painter to different points of the sheer fabric hanging from the trusses at the warehouse-like space.

“Up a foot and a half,” Zimmerman called back to Fleming — one of many directives given as they considered the kinks that could occur in front of an audience.

On Monday night, Zimmerman had a tech run of a live art show that will be part of a fundraiser for the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program. “Brave” is on Oct. 23 at Clyde Iron Works, and includes Zimmerman’s most vertical attempt at silk painting, while Kathy McTavish provides cello music. Sheila Packa and other local poets will be reading while he paints. Afterward, Karen McTavish will create five quilts from Zimmerman’s single painting. These quilts are being auctioned off before the show. Go to www.braveevent.blogspot.com for details.

As the idea was forming, Zimmerman sought out Fleming, the facilities manager at Vertical Endeavors in Canal Park, to help him with the logistics.

“I thought it was possible, but crazy,” Fleming said.

At Monday night’s rehearsal, Fleming had ropes attached to a belt, and took direction from Zimmerman. He had already done a pre-show lift of Zimmerman, and considered the strength of the roof trusses and the weight of the artist. Fleming consulted a piece of white tagboard with rough sketches of the themes Zimmerman wanted to incorporate and a map of stopping points along the swatch of silk — written out almost like a sheet

of music. For every foot Fleming cranked the pulley system, Zimmerman moved three inches.

Zimmerman's style is to be positioned behind the fabric, which is lit in a way that reveals the color absorbing into the silk as he develops his figures. Last winter, he created a new backdrop at each performance of "The Secret Garden" at the Duluth Playhouse, creating images on five panels each night.

Zimmerman had a handful of helpers on board, keeping track of problem areas and serving as caddies as he worked. His wife, Andrea Wahman, brought him a roll of tape and consulted with the artist. She is the one who kicks these ideas around with Zimmerman.

"I married an electrical engineer," she joked as he ascended the structure.

This is all part of a big plan that Zimmerman is plotting. He would like to do a painting on the outside of a building in a particularly rainy city. Something where the colors could pool at the bottom of his piece.

"I've been wanting to go vertical," Zimmerman said of this project. "I like the idea of painting big."

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