

VIEW



UWindsor Researchers

MAKING A BETTER WORLD

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ON THE COVER:

Roja Moradipour, UWindsor master's student in materials engineering, is trying to determine the melting point of aluminum. Her work could result in lighter engines and vehicles that are more fuel efficient.

STUDENT PROFILE



Stephen Surlin, Visual Arts

ARTIST/ACTIVIST

Stephen Surlin is searching for the right words. It's not that he's at a loss for them – he simply has so much to say, to do, and to achieve. It's as though the bright and curious third-year student is breathing in potential and exhaling ideas.

Majoring in Visual Arts, Surlin is laying a broad foundation for his future, minoring in women's studies and computer science. His ultimate goal is to take his passion for art, social justice and technology and fire these elements into a finished piece that inspires thought, social equality, and even sustainable products that benefit disempowered communities.

As a child, he wandered the halls of the University of Windsor with his father, professor Stuart Surlin. As an adult, he has returned to campus, intrigued by the unique approach of the Visual Arts program and the opportunity to major and minor in such disparate areas that, nonetheless, are allowing him to follow where his interests can lead.

"I didn't take one art class in high school," says Surlin. "But I don't think it was necessary because I don't think that what is taught there relates to the most contemporary art forms."

Instead, he chose the philosophy course offered at Belle River High School. "That influenced me a lot. I became political very early on."

At the end of Grade 12, Surlin found himself spending the summer poring over books by philosophers such as Nietzsche, Camus, and Samuel Beckett.

After high school he chose to attend the Recording Arts Canada in Toronto, a college that focuses on analog and digital recording, engineering, production, audio postproduction, MIDI and multimedia.

There, Surlin began to take a burgeoning interest in music and film and then, finally, art.

He decided that a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree would be the best route to express what he wanted to do – influence social change.

"A part of the reason I chose UWindsor was the Border Culture course taught by Lee Rodney. It looks at the impact of physical or metaphorical borders in terms of art and its development and touches on artists who deal with this."

He points to the work of Banksy, an anonymous English graffiti artist and political activist, director and painter, as his influence. His satirical street art combines dark humour with graffiti. His works of political and social commentary have been featured on streets, walls and bridges in cities throughout the world.

"In particular, he has an installation in the Gaza Strip," says Surlin. "He brings a true social justice and political dimension to art."

He nourishes his own interest in social justice through his minor in women's studies.

"The class 'Women in Globalization' was very influential on me. It talks about labour issues, especially in Africa."

In 2010, Surlin travelled to Nigeria with the AIDS Crisis Response Team, a non-profit organization that provides direct medical services, medications and education to people in developing countries affected by the disease.

"I handed out a lot of glasses there. I had people telling me they wanted to be able to thread a needle, to see better," he says.

The visit inspired Surlin to fuse his interest in social justice issues, his knowledge of electronics and design, and his creativity to produce ideas to improve the lives of the people he had met in Nigeria.

"After my trip to Nigeria, I did a lot of research on the idea of architecture as activism," Surlin says, "I liked the idea that art could have a practical application."

His first piece of what he terms "activism design projects" was a solar-powered rechargeable LED lamp, a low-cost, sustainable and repairable light source for work after dark. "Most of the people I

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met had no electrical power. They relied on kerosene lamps to read by or sew."

The lamp collects sunlight during the day. At night, the solar-powered battery powers the lamp's six LED lights. The charge can last several days.

He next designed a solar-powered, rechargeable LED bag. "I used the idea that this bag could be used during the work day, while being charged by the sun's rays. At night, the bag, which has five LED lights on the outside flap, can be hung on a hook or placed on a table to light a work area."

Surlin chose cheap, easily accessed materials for his pieces, and hopes to return to Nigeria in the coming year, bringing the ideas with him.

"I am also working for Justicia for Migrant Farm Workers in Leamington, Ont. I want to find some way to combine my art with activism. You don't have to go to a developing or third world country to make an impact with these ideas."

Surlin has begun to showcase his work. This past January, he held an exhibit, "Artist as Activist" at the University's LeBel Gallery. One aspect of the exhibit included a table filled with the tools that could be used to create a small seamstress business.

He hopes to earn his Master's in Fine Arts, and eventually a PhD.

"I would love to teach at a university where you have the resources of a practising artist as well as interaction with students. I want to influence people who are interested in the same things that interest me, while I am developing through my exposure to them. A symbiotic relationship like that appeals to me." ▣



At right:

1. Beckett's Car With A Broken Window, Paper model 2010.
2. Surlin is shown helping people find the glasses they need for reading and other activities while in Enugu State, Nigeria AIDS Crisis Response Team.
3. Lebel Drawing Illustration 2010.
4. Save, Acrylic paint on stretched canvas 2009.

Visit Stephen Surlin online at stephensurlin.com