

Steven and William Ladd come home to St. Louis with art museum show



OCTOBER 25, 2015 5:00 AM • BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER

Brothers Steven and William Ladd left Affton years ago, but they haven't strayed far from their roots: The events of their childhoods are a constant in their art.

Their new exhibition "Scouts or Sports?" exemplifies that. Now open at the St. Louis Art Museum, it's filled with images drawn from their youth: a work called "Cardinal Nation," another featuring rows of pup tents, and ants ... lots and lots of ants.

Steven, 38, and William, 37, are unmistakably siblings. Enthusiastic huggers, they speak rapidly and finish each others' thoughts. Steven takes the lead in

interviews, with frequent injections from William. Steven is the chief planner, coming up with ideas and making drawings. William, who can be a jokester, is also a tough taskmaster, in charge of beading and putting visitors — like their parents — to work in the studio.

They attended the former Mary, Queen of the Universe elementary school in Lemay, where their mother was a lunch lady, and Christian Brothers College High School. They're the youngest of the four children of Charles and Barbara Ladd. Their older sister, Bee, works with emotionally disturbed children in San Diego, and got her artistic brothers involved in educational efforts with the disadvantaged. Their other brother, Matt, of St. Louis, took up the family trade and became an electrician, working with his father and uncles.

The brothers started collaborating in high school, in the theater department. William discovered a gift for beadwork and macramé. At Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Steven learned to make clothing, and how to turn the patterns he could see in his head into something that could be worn.

A MOVE TO NEW YORK

William was the first to go to New York, in 1998; Steven followed a year later. They found a place in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick that was cheap and spacious. Together, they started making handbags and intricate couture accessories, all presented in elaborate hand-made boxes. The work took hundreds of hours for each piece. The boxes were stacked into towers, and opened in rhythmic, ritualistic performances for an invited audience of curators, directors, collectors and others, as they shared the stories behind the work. In 2005, they went to Paris to show their work to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs at the Louvre. “They were like, ‘This hasn’t been done before,’ and they included it in a retrospective of the handbag,” Steven says. “Then we were in the Cooper-Hewett’s design triennial. ...”

“And at that time we were still making handbags and design accessories,” interrupts William, “and we’d still do the performances. At a certain point, a collector, Beth Rudin DeWoody, came to us and was like, ‘You can do and be whatever you want. I want a glass-beaded grenade.’”

It sent them in new directions. They started making “landscapes,” handmade boxes that contained processed textiles made into scrolls, and what William calls “shared memories.”

In 2011, they got their first solo museum show, for the Contemporary Museum Hawaii. “It was freedom,” Steven says. “It was ‘make whatever you want.’” More shows, at more museums, here and abroad, including the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, followed.

Today they work with materials including belts, glass, laser-cut card stock, fabric, trinkets, recycled materials and found objects. Much of what they use came from a factory-turned-museum in New York now called the Invisible Dog Art Center, what Steven calls “massive amounts of free material.” They even use the dust from the boards from which their boxes are built.

HOMETOWN PRIDE

From those first exhibitions the Ladds drew heavily on their childhood experiences. Not surprisingly, every element of this show is about growing up in St. Louis, “our family, and all of these family stories,” Steven says. That includes the ants. It started taking shape last year when they met the art museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, Simon Kelly, and its deputy director for curatorial affairs and museum programs, Jason Busch. They were receptive to the Ladds and their work, and had an open slot for a show. “Obviously, we’ve been dying to have a show here our whole lives,” Steven says. Simon Kelly notes that the museum has an interest in working with artists with both a St. Louis connection and a national or international profile. “Steven and William have those elements. It’s really exciting for us as well; this is new work. What they’ve done for this

show is really a new and exciting development in their output, and it's great to see that happening here." Research assistant Molly Moog also worked on the exhibition.

The Ladds had one year to prepare. It was a quick turnaround for the Ladds, who usually take two to three years. "We really had to push ourselves out of our box to come up with a whole new way to show the works that we wanted to do," Steven says.

That included doing more with paper, learning how to make it themselves and working extensively in papier-mâché. It meant doing more with glass, and with light. It's also about, as they put it, "hometown pride."

"In third grade, our mom came to each one of us and gave us an ultimatum," Steven says. "We had to choose between Scouts or sports, because they couldn't keep taking all four kids to all the events all the time. All of us chose sports."

THE ANTS GO MARCHING

If there's a consistent theme, it's ants. In grade school, they pulled a red Lego box from under a bed and opened it up, "and thousands of ants poured out of it," Steven recalls. "That was the beginning of ant infestations in our life. At that moment, the ant became a symbol for us. At first it was a negative connotation; over the years, it has evolved into a symbol of the people we love in our lives, of family, of joining the colony, and a symbol of our collaboration." Part of the exhibition is placed in the Alexandria, Va., and Charleston, S.C., period rooms on the museum's lower level. In the Alexandria rooms, the original red Lego box lies on the floor, with 75,000 laser-cut paper ants spilling out of it, migrating to the mantle, and a saucer. In the Charleston room, a half-dozen two-foot-long non-anatomically-correct black ants hold the floor. Says William: "We've been dreaming of doing an infestation in these rooms since 2011."

The bulk of "Scouts or Sports?" is in the East Building's Gallery 250, where the ants go marching on. Large landscapes — four in earth tones for scouting, eight in bright colors for sports, all with elaborately beaded eruptions coming from their textured moonscape surfaces — hang on two walls. (The Ladds used a KitchenAid mixer to make the paper pulp for their construction; it's formulated to last for centuries.) On the other two walls are other series, "Boys versus Girls," "Injury" and "Merit Badges."

"Boys" pits reddish tones against blue tones. Handcrafted boxes called maquettes are filled with intriguing rolled-up belts, trinkets and little balls produced by mixing flour and water with sawdust. Some are named for colors, some for individuals from the Ladds' school years.

"Merit Badges" are drawings on multilayered paper, which the Ladds learned to make themselves with the assistance of a master paper maker in New York, with the addition of trinkets. "Sports Injuries," in 12 different color ranges, makes use of a roll of canvas a St. Louis friend gave them, with part of it eaten away by insects or chemicals. Objects placed

below the surface make circles, and there are drawings on top.

On the floor is “Dad-n-Lad,” the real name of a scout camping event that the three Ladd brothers did with their father. Its 48 boxes stack; each lid boasts rows of cut and folded paper tents, and, when opened, reveal more ants and cave-like spaces, for Missouri’s “Cave State” heritage.

As a part of their commitment to education, the Ladds will also hold what they call a “Scrollathon,” working with school kids. They engage with and teach everyone from school children in every town they visit to female inmates at the Reikers Island correctional facility to make scrolls and talk about the process of making artwork and “about our core values: ‘Collaborate,’ ‘Spend Your Life Doing What You Love,’ and ‘Be Focused and Disciplined,’” Steven says.

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How much • Free

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