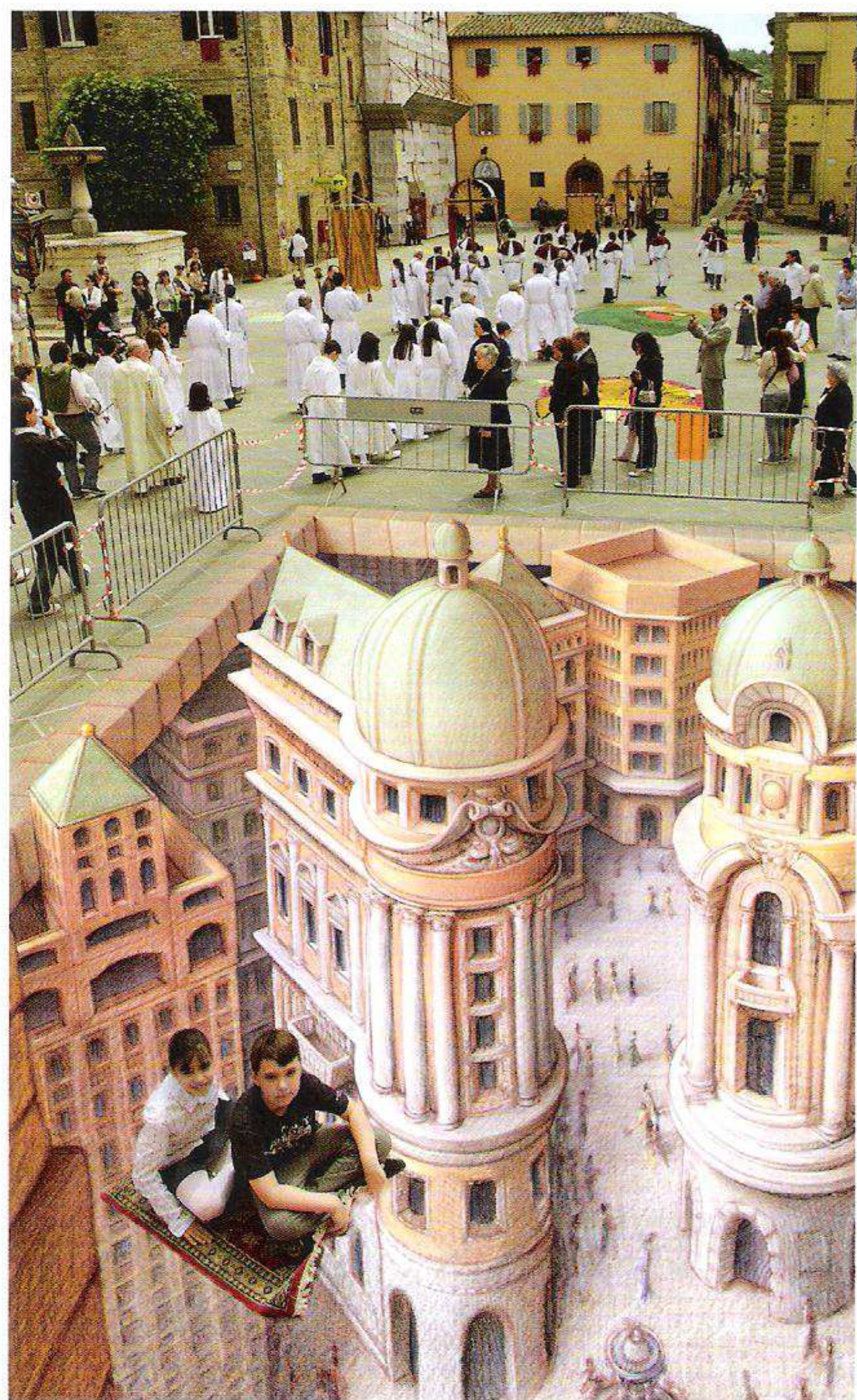
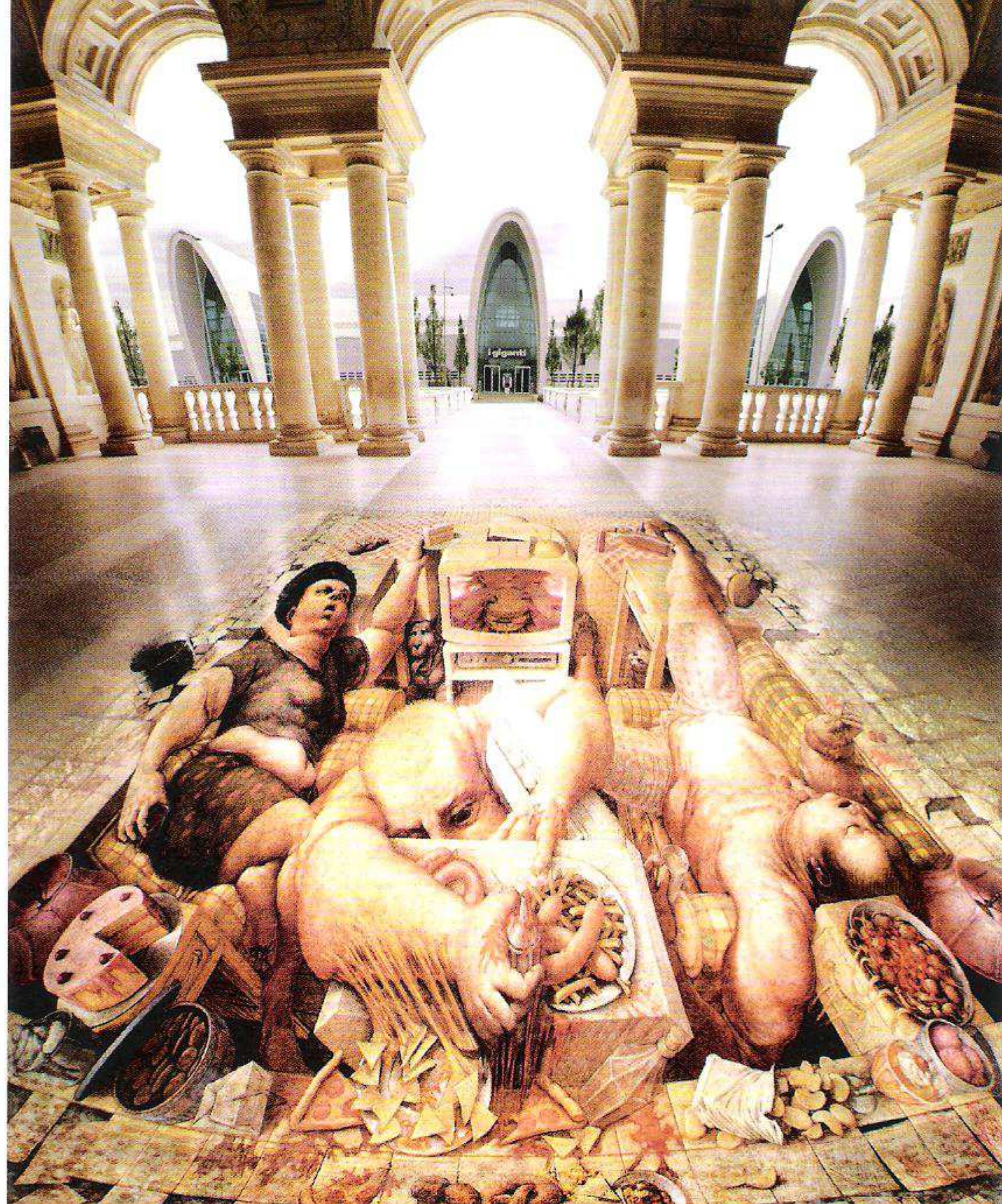


Kurt Wenner

Master Illusionist Comes to Town

by Joe Pagetta



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KURT WENNER

Kurt Wenner has a problem with art and creativity. Not his own, mind you, but in the way art is being taught in schools and the way we as a society have come to define creativity. To illustrate the point, he refers to the definition of creativity from Wikipedia.

“It’s a ‘phenomenon’ and uses the word ‘create’ to define itself, then it has to have ‘value,’” the San Juan Islands-based artist says, placing extra emphasis on the words he finds most absurd. “I think creativity has nothing do with something having value, and nothing to do with the product. It’s a process. So the definition is completely flawed.”

Creativity will be the topic of Wenner’s talk, “Creativity Redefined,” when he speaks at the Create2012 conference this month in Mufreesboro at MTSU. He plans to stress the importance of going back and figuring out what creativity really means and redefining it “in order to be able to even hope to teach it or have it become a part of our didactic.”

Wenner has been going back to explore creativity his entire career. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design and Art Center College of Design before working for NASA as an advanced scientific space illustrator. In 1982 he left NASA for Italy to pursue his love of classical art, studying the works of the great masters and drawing from classical sculpture. He discovered the language of form in Western figurative art, and got the neoclassical training necessary to follow the style he was most interested in. To finance his travels and studies he became a Madonnaro and created chalk paintings on the streets of Rome, in the process inventing an art form all his own known as anamorphic or 3D pavement art. It required a new geometry—now known as Wenner’s hyperbolic perspective—that resulted in compositions that appear to rise and fall into the ground. He is recognized as a master of the art form and, in 1985, was the subject of National Geographic’s documentary *Masterpieces in Chalk*.

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His studies also influenced a sometimes-polarizing view on the way art is taught, and even what art is. He has come to the conclusion that we have lost our way.

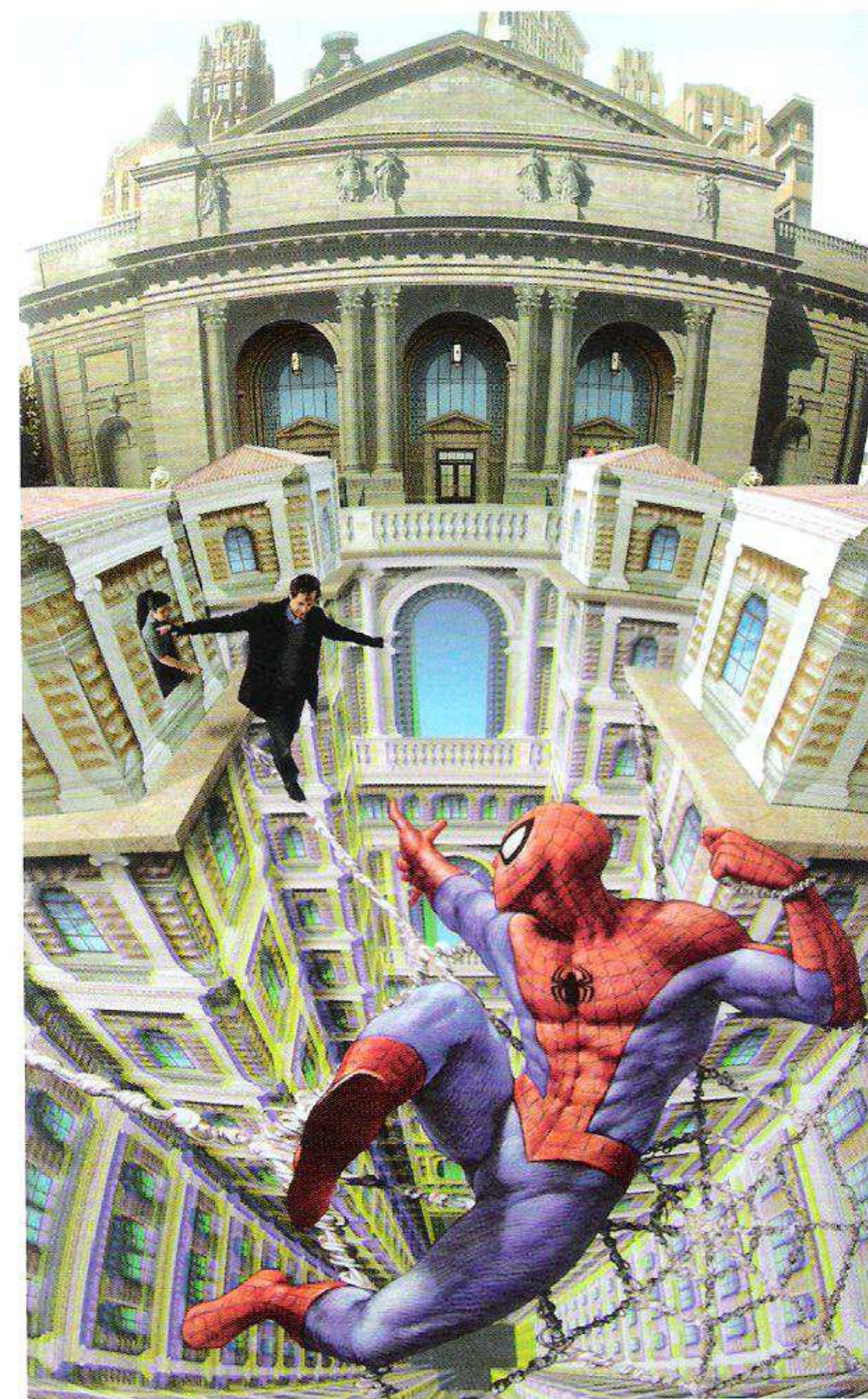
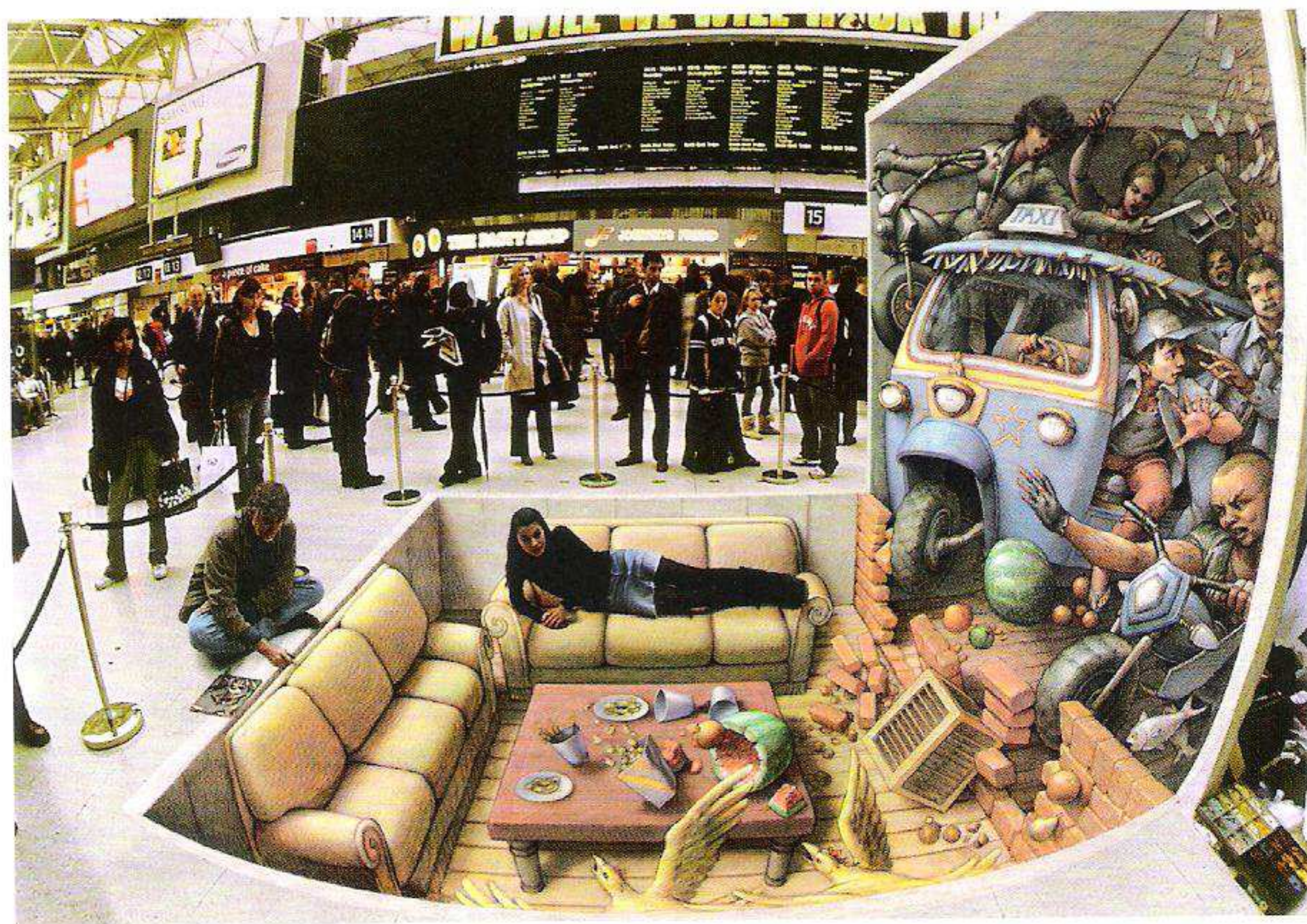
"It was all public art in the Renaissance," he says. "If you had asked Leonardo (Da Vinci) whether he had expressed himself, he wouldn't have known what you meant. An artist would have looked at you as if 'what are you talking about?' So the function of the artist in those societies, in effect, was very different than it is now, and I don't think we're in a great position. I don't think there has been a positive evolution."

Part of the problem, Wenner believes, is that figurative art and classical art are no longer considered art. "Most students, art students and otherwise, that's what they want to learn," he says. "But society and educational institutions have told them no, you can't do this, because now we've had Pollock and Warhol, and we don't do that anymore. But that's something that we tell the students. It's not the natural tendency of the students to want to go that way. Rhode Island, as well as every other institution, doesn't treat figurative art as fine art. You can't even get a degree in it. So a lot of what I've questioned is why. Is this really important; is this the way to go? Should someone who likes Caravaggio study illustration? I don't think so. I think it's an absurdity. It hasn't helped, and it hasn't worked. It has made the arts peripheral.

"The visual arts are unlike any other art form. If you look at music and dance, they keep their classical form, and then they improvise and do new things as well, but the visual arts don't do that. They decided that they had to destroy their tradition in order to go forward.

Art schools no longer even consider Michelangelo art, Wenner insists. "I just think it's wrong," he adds. "I don't really take an exception to conceptual art. I just think the idea of denigrating figures in art as we've done was a huge mistake.

Wenner's appearance at Create2012 won't be his first in the Nashville area. In 2001, he created a chalk drawing, *Danae*, outside the Frist Center for the Visual Arts to celebrate the museum's grand opening. The artist's comfortable relationship with the impermanence of that piece, as well as many of his early and most famous chalk drawings, goes back to his original point about the process inherent to creativity.



"I do permanent work, and it's nice to leave a legacy of some works," he says. "But what it taught me was that art was really process. And if it's process, whether it stays around or not is inconsequential. If it stays around, it's really more a benefit to who might be collecting it or using it as decoration or for whatever other reason. It doesn't really change my relationship to the painting at all. I don't keep them around. I don't even have pictures of them." ✓

For more information on Create2012, see our education section on page 57. For contributing writer Joe Pagetta's extended interview with Wenner, please visit www.nashvillearts.com. For more about Kurt Wenner, visit www.kurtwenner.com.