

ART AND THE ZEN OF CHICKEN WIRE



There is no Zen in chicken wire. The title is a lie. There is only pain and remorse in chicken wire. Chicken wire wants to take out your eyes. Chicken wire wants to scar your face and rip off an ear. Chicken wire will put tiny holes in your arms and legs, your wrists and ankles...and then it will shed micro bits of metal into your coffee.

Well, maybe not your coffee. That would be insensitive and we all know that chickens are sensitive (and delicious) so chicken wire, by association, must be sensitive. If not delicious.

At this point, I'd like to change the subject but that would be insensitive to the title of this piece. And we all know that titles are sensitive and mostly on the verge of tears. Well, in some stories they are...but not in this story. This is not about titles; this is about what the title is about.

I was going to start this off as “With chicken wire I made my art.” But that reminded me of things that other people had written (some of whom might have been me), so I decided to start it this way...

It started way back in 2016. The Emerge Artists Collective, of which I was a member, was to put on an exhibition at the Andrew and Laura McCain Gallery in Florenceville, New Brunswick.

I had lots of things on my mind back then, including a landfill that I’d been driving by for several years and gagging on the stench of runaway consumerism burning before being buried. I wanted to get back at that landfill for ruining my nostrils so badly that my morning coffee was laced with the under taste of burning garbage.

The landfill loomed over the side of the highway like a big dirty glacier held in check by trees. The egg of an idea started cracking in my head. I wasn’t sure what was going on but I knew that I had to take a picture of that landfill and that it might have something to do with the Florenceville show.

I must have passed it a dozen times before I remembered to bring my camera, but I finally remembered soon after the first, second and third snowfalls of winter and now the landfill was looking even more like a glacier. I pulled over and got my camera (a Canon 5D2) out of the trunk and attached my 17 – 40 ultra-wide angle lens. I was on the far side of the highway with the landfill to my left, which meant scurrying like crazy across two lanes of roaring highway, a concrete barrier and two more lanes of screaming highway before I got to the other side alive in spite of all the trucks, cars, buses and rickshaws that tried to render me as road kill. I could hear their shrill voices as they approached, “Oh look, a photographer! Let’s run him over and render him as road kill!”

I was practically flying by the time I reached the other side of the highway; in fact, I was going so fast that when I got there, expecting to slow my pace by degrees, I almost ran over the side of the road and into a gulley that was invisible from the road, which led me to conclude that maybe I’d parked on the wrong side of the highway.

Hyped up on awe and existential fear, I noticed that the gulley followed the highway where it passed the landfill, and there was no way I could place my tripod where I wanted it...which would have been 50 feet in the air over the gulley. Not having the wings or super powers I’d ordered on Amazon just days before, I decided to take the picture from the side of the highway. I figured it would have been better if I had been able to get in closer, but later at home, when I had the image on my computer, I realized that I had been in exactly the right spot to capture the landfill and frame it with a sprinkling of wild Canadian forest.



Seeing the image on my computer triggered an idea that I suspected of hiding in the nether regions of my post-hippie brain. I thought to myself... what if all the garbage buried under that pile was to be suddenly unleashed on the world like a bursting dam? I think the “bursting” angle came from what I’d seen at the bottom of the gully. A stream ran through it, parallel to the highway until it swerved under it to eventually make its way down to the Saint John River.

This photograph that I’d risked my life to capture was going to be the centerpiece for a statement on garbage. Yes, garbage. Garbage is the nature of our times. It’s everywhere...land, sea and air. If there’s one thing we excel at, it’s polluting the planet with our garbage. Ask any deep sea turtle and they’ll all say the same thing: “Keep your one serving plastic out of my nose.”

Standing at the precipice of that gully with murderous traffic to my back, I lifted my camera, pointed it at the landfill and, after a moment or two of confusion, removed the lens cap from the lens and took the picture just as an 18-wheeler blasted my back with the hot rush of its passing.

Later, when I was safely home and sitting in front of my computer looking at the image and patting myself on the back (which was still smoldering from the 18 wheeler) for getting the perfect image with just one shot (something I rarely do), I was amazed. The detail was amazing and I thought, *Surely to God...someone else must have taken this shot...maybe the driver of the 18-wheeler.*

By now, the ideas for my piece in the exhibition were starting to settle into something I could visualize: a landfill crying out: “Enough is enough, you bastards! Take your garbage back!” as it huffed and puffed and blew a tsunami of garbage right back at us.

I had a theme. I had a photograph. I had a story and all I needed now was...chicken wire.

I have no idea what gave me that thought, but I knew that my art was in dire need of chicken wire. My destiny was wrapped in chicken wire as chicken wire was wrapped in me and I have no idea what that means but I knew that I needed a really big picture of that landfill...something worthy of chicken wire.

A friend who worked in a print shop offered to produce a black and white four by eight foot print for a great price and I jumped at it. The print job was spectacular and unbelievably detailed. It was worthy of chicken wire.

I wrung my brain trying to figure out how the chicken wire and image were going to work together to create that tsunami of garbage until it suddenly exploded in my head while I was standing in line in my favorite coffee shop...much to the bemusement of others in the shop as they stared in horror at the steam and fire and smoke shooting out of my eyes, nose and ears.

But then, a great idea is worth a great show.

Garbage bags! I needed garbage bags. I mean, garbage bags are the heart and soul of a landfill. Think of the thousands upon thousands of garbage bags buried under thousands upon thousands of garbage bags and all of them thinking the same thinking: I want out!

And now all I needed was garbage. I was sure the gallery would have some less than positive things to say about real garbage being on display for a month or so, which put a damper on realism but reality had never stopped me before.

I was fiddling with this thought while I was fiddling with a pen and creating small abstract drawings in black gel. I had hundreds of these. Hundreds. They were bursting out of drawers and folders and pouring over the sides of shelves...spilling out windows and creating piles of black gel angst in the strangest places. Just ask any of the squirrels in my neighborhood.





I had a photo. I had garbage drawings. I'd just bought three boxes of garbage bags, both white and black. And I was standing in line at the hardware store holding two bales of chicken wire and thinking: *Oh boy. Oh boy. Oh boy.*

The first thing I needed to do was make the photo scary because we all know that landfills are scary and are home to all manner of things so scary that we put them into plastic bags and hope never to see them again.

I broke out of the line at the hardware store, chicken wire bales in hand, and came back a few minutes later with a can of black paint and some paint brushes, thinking: *Oh boy. Oh boy. Oh boy.* Though, judging from the looks of the people around me, I might have been saying that out loud.

Back at the studio, I unloaded everything and started in. I had no real idea about how I was going to do this. I had a vague idea but it was this hazy thing that involved a picture of a landfill, black paint, garbage bags, garbage drawings and chicken wire.

I spread the 4 by 8 photo on the floor and pinned it down so that it couldn't get away. My hand moved inexorably to the brush by the open can of black paint, grabbed the brush, thrust it into the can of paint, brought it out dripping blackness and plunged it down onto the top of the photo.

What I saw took my breath away. The paint and the photo worked together to state the obvious...yech. This was exactly the message I was trying to convey: Yech. Only one thing was

wrong. The image needed some kind of firm backing. This is when I found out how much a piece of 4 by 8 wood cost. But I won't get into that. I paid the price and even bought glue and in no time the image was glued to the wood and leaning against the studio wall where I could let the black paint drip down the surface of the photo like dark blood bleeding out of the sky. The image was beginning to look scary. My head was on fire. I knew where this was going.

I placed it against the wall and created a bed of chicken wire springing out of its base. I tried to form it into what appeared to be a tidal wave into which I worked the garbage bags with inked garbage images spilling out of the bags into the chicken wire.



And here's where things became chicken wire dangerous. The wire wasn't as malleable as I thought it would be. In fact, it resisted any attempt on my part to make it a component of my art. Chicken wire is a bastard. It struck out at my hands, ankles, wrists, chest and eyes. Each night, I left the studio scratched and bloodied...chicken wired but satisfied that I'd managed to advance another few inches until the piece was finished. It looked like this...

It was a landfill on the loose...heaving a tsunami of garbage back into the world. I was elated, proud, happy and had a deep sense of artistic accomplishment and, when the day came to set up

at the gallery, I took everything down, packed it, loaded it into the truck we'd rented to carry our works a couple of hundred miles to the gallery, unloaded it and began the dicey work of re-creating the piece in the gallery.

It took a few hours, and I emerged from the work once again bloodied and sore, but with a feeling of accomplishment. All those months of chicken wire suffering and pain had paid off. Just one thing bothered me...everybody thought it was a king-size chicken wire bed. But that was OK with me. Drowned by our garbage or sleeping on our garbage, it worked out the same.

This is what it looked like as a bed on opening night



And I vowed to never again use chicken wire in my art. That, unfortunately, turned out to be a pipe dream until another exhibition screamed across my soul for chicken wire, proving ultimately that chicken wire is a bastard.

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COMING SOON!

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE TO GET OUT OF
BED...

There are some things we don't want to do together.
But we do.



Blowing Up

by Biff Mitchell