Joey Ellis '03
is Saving the Environment Through Art

By Don Cuerdon

Beijing is to young, artistic expatriates such as Joey Ellis '03 these days what the Left Bank was for similarly minded people of the 1920s—a place outside the dominant paradigm to explore one's art. China might seem an ironic place to find one's artistic freedom, but this is exactly what has happened to this young alumnus.

Joey is the only Westerner to graduate from China's prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts sculpture program, where he earned a B.F.A. and won the award for best thesis after studying ceramics at Alfred University. To be the first-ever, he obviously did so against all odds. To succeed, Joey immersed himself in becoming Chinese. A story in the January 10, 2010 *New York Times* says he " . . . poured tea for his professors, carried their luggage, and gave the right gifts." He also used visual mnemonic tricks to master Mandarin.

Perhaps most importantly, he also mastered the concept of *guanxi*, the art of making connections. In return for his cultural immersion efforts, including his deferential treatment of his professors, his mentors found him work and treated him with respect. Since then he's let his work do the talking. In 2008 Joey earned $70,000 creating sculptures for Chinese collectors and large corporations such as Chevron and Bank of America. To give you an idea of the economy of scale, Joey does much of his work in a 10,760-square-foot studio in Jingdezhen, a city teeming with porcelain artists, that he rents for $245 per month.

Joey has a knack for creating beauty out of the mundane, such as his "China Tree" made in 2009 from 2,000 common vinegar and soy sauce pots purchased at local markets. The pots are strung together with string and lit from inside to create a thing of beauty that's 30 feet tall. He also has a gift for using art to convey ideas. At first it was simple notions of putting pictures and ideas on everyday ceramics, such as in-flight oxygen mask instructions on coffee mugs. And then Greenpeace called with a commission.

The result of collaborating with Greenpeace was "Tomorrow's Choice," a unique ice sculpture installation in Beijing in 2009. "The piece consisted of 100 life-size sculptures of children, individually hand carved from blocks of ice," says Joey. "They were then placed in the sun to represent the fragility of our children's futures due to climate change and its affect on the glacial melting of the Himalayas. The ice consisted of water collected from the Ganges, Yellow and Yangtze rivers, all of which are highly threatened due to the global climate crisis."

It was right about here that Joey truly began to learn what it is he wants to say with his artistic voice. He was chosen as a TED (Technology Entertainment and Design) Fellow in 2010. According to TED, "The TED Fellows program is designed to bring together young world-changers and trailblazers who have shown unusual accomplishment and exceptional courage." Joey has shown both and his TED Talk is on YouTube. While attending what has come to be called TEDU, Joey met TED Fellow Colleen Flanigan, who helped him stumble upon the science of Biorock. This led him to Indonesia and Dr. Thomas J. Goreau, president of the Global Coral Reef Alliance, and a collaborator with marine scientist Professor Wolf H. Hilbertz in the creation of Biorock.

This does come back to art in a moment, but first a little science and ecology. Of Dr. Goreau, Joey says, "One of my main anthems in life is: For true information, you've got to go to the source. This guy was the source. He taught me not just about coral, but about how coral affects us all and how the sea itself is in fact even cooler than outer space. I immediately became a Goreau junkie and sucked in as much information as I could." Part of that information was how to create an environment that not only encourages coral growth, but does so in an accelerated fashion—and, in Joey's case, in the form of undersea sculpture.

"Biorock sculptures are metal rods that have an electrical pulse flowing through them at all times (mostly powered by solar or wind energy)," says Joey. "Then, sea minerals begin to react with the electrified metal itself to create a reaction that builds a coat of limestone around the metal. The limestone grows, slow but strong, and after a year it is harder than concrete. Coral loves limestone, so corals then begin to make their home in these new 'reefs.' What's interesting is that when you give coral 'shock therapy,' it stimulates coral growth at rates of up to five times normal."

The result of this study was a series of undersea sculptures named BIOROCK, now part of the Gili Islands Eco Trust, in Lombak, Indonesia. But, again, that was just the stepping stone to the next phase: helping the Chinese people move away from dynamite fishing and toward eco-tourism by "building" Biorock reefs that also protect shorelines from erosion, create sea grass and mangrove lagoons, and encourage biodiversity of the oceans.

To do this, Joey went back to China and started the Laowai Collaborative. *Laowai*, the Mandarin word for outsider, is a nod to Joey's foreign status in China, despite his immersion efforts. One of the projects of the organization is Kung-Fu for Coral, a campaign to raise funds for translating the large database of coral reef publications into Chinese, says Joey, "using graphic design, animation and just plain writing as an instrument for change. Throughout the process we will reconstruct the information into public-friendly design and animation that simplifies what's at stake and highlights how to rectify the problem."

We're sure the adventure into art, environment, and meaning won't end there. Keep an eye on this guy. He's walking the talk.

To learn more about Joey Ellis, the Laowai Collaborative, and Kung-Fu for Coral, visit http://cargocollective.com.