

Mike Stilkey hits the books to make art

By John Greiner-Ferris
Banner Correspondent

A range of words and phrases could describe Los Angeles-based artist Mike Stilkey's work. Melancholy. A lingering sense of loss. Whimsical, yet poignant. And there is the inescapable comparison to such moody German expressionist artists from the 1930s as Otto Dix and Egon Schiele. Whatever your response, there is one word you cannot ignore: discarded. As in discarded books, the primary material he uses in his art to elicit an ironic smile.

Stilkey paints on stacks of books. He paints single figures and anthropomorphic animals, all in a dreamlike world. Sometimes he paints on a stack of five or six books, sometimes on stacks of many thousands. Let's be clear: The books are not merely used or pre-owned. They are *discarded* — no longer wanted or needed, destined for the landfill. By painting on them and building with them, Stilkey gives them new life and purpose. Thanks to Rice Polak Gallery in Provincetown, they've made their way to a group show with an opening on Friday.

Stilkey, 43, grew up on Malibu Lake in the Santa Monica Mountains in southern California, in what was basically a hippie party town. "It was essentially a shack on a hill," he says of his home. "My parents were young and had a kid." By the time he was 10, his mother was drinking heavily and his father was unemployed and an addict. He estimates that about 90 percent of his friends at the time were from broken homes, all of them into skateboarding, punk music and graffiti. Talk about discarded. But skateboarding gave young Stilkey freedom that he can still recall, and as for tagging — well, there are many who consider graffiti an art form. Stilkey is quick to point out that he never



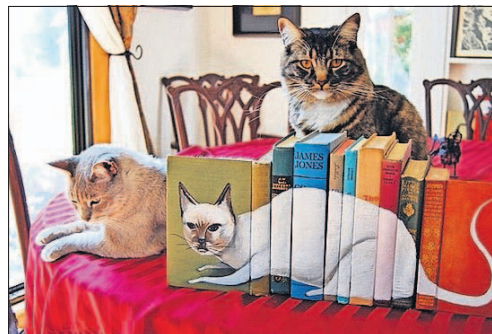
Mike Stilkey poses beside a pile of discarded books — his blank canvas. [PHOTO MIKE STILKEY]

The art of the stack

What: Opening of group show, including new work by Mike Stilkey
When: 7 pm Friday
Where: Rice Polak Gallery, 430 Commercial St., Provincetown
Admission: Free

discarded. But there's something curious about him willing to paint on books, but not on houses.

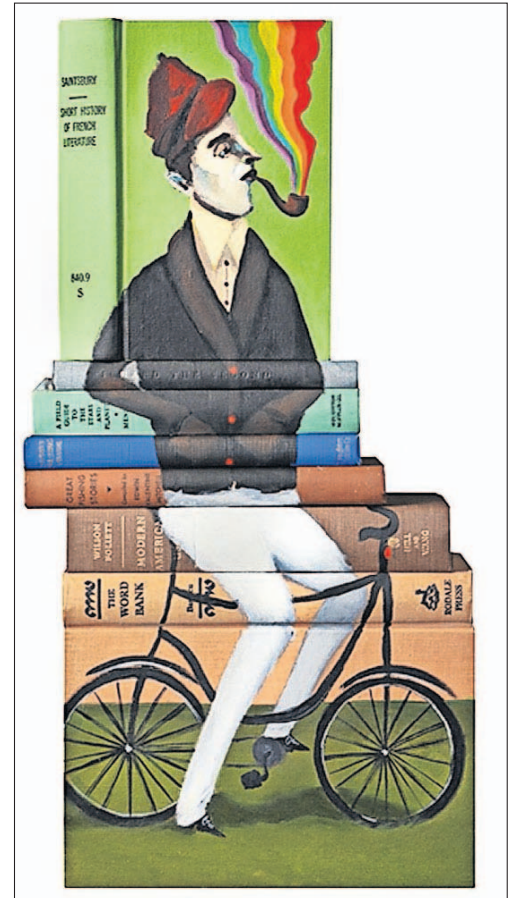
In his early 20s, Stilkey was drawing, and without really knowing it, he was becoming the artist he is today. He had lost his job,



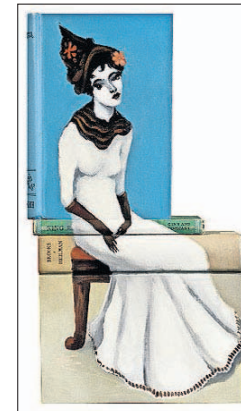
Stilkey's cats imitate his art — and vice versa. [PHOTO COURTESY MIKE STILKEY]

his girlfriend had left him, his parents were at the height of their addictions, and he had moved back in with them. For him, drawing was a way to "check

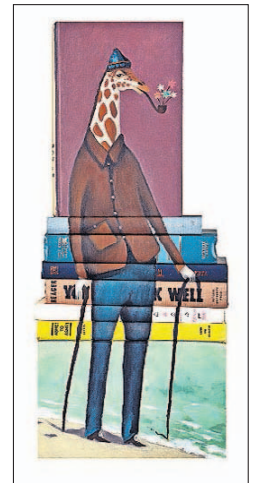
out into a fantasy world," he says. Never formally schooled, Stilkey watched YouTube videos on art and just kept drawing. Later, when success had already



"Short History of French Literature," by Mike Stilkey. He paints with acrylic and colored pencil on piles of discarded books. [PHOTO COURTESY RICE POLAK GALLERY]



"Jane Austen," by Mike Stilkey. [PHOTO COURTESY RICE POLAK GALLERY]



"Time well spent," by Mike Stilkey. Each of his book sculptures is about 20 inches high. [PHOTO COURTESY RICE POLAK GALLERY]

tapped him on the shoulder, Stilkey was invited with a number of academically

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