

Painting the Unseen

BY JOAN FISCHER



Thistles, 2001

Nationally renowned Shorewood artist David Lenz finds beauty and heroism in unexpected subjects

There they stand, the farmer couple, a man and woman who together have toiled for decades. They are surrounded by the land that sustains them but demands never-ending work and allows for few, if any, comforts. From the expressions on their faces, the viewer gets a visceral feeling for their lives. Their bearing imparts dignity and a sense of both ownership and belonging; they are solidly of their land. This portrait of dairy farmers Erv and Mercedes Wagner, in an oil painting called *Thistles*, is so realistic it could be mistaken for a photograph; the technical virtuosity is jaw-dropping.

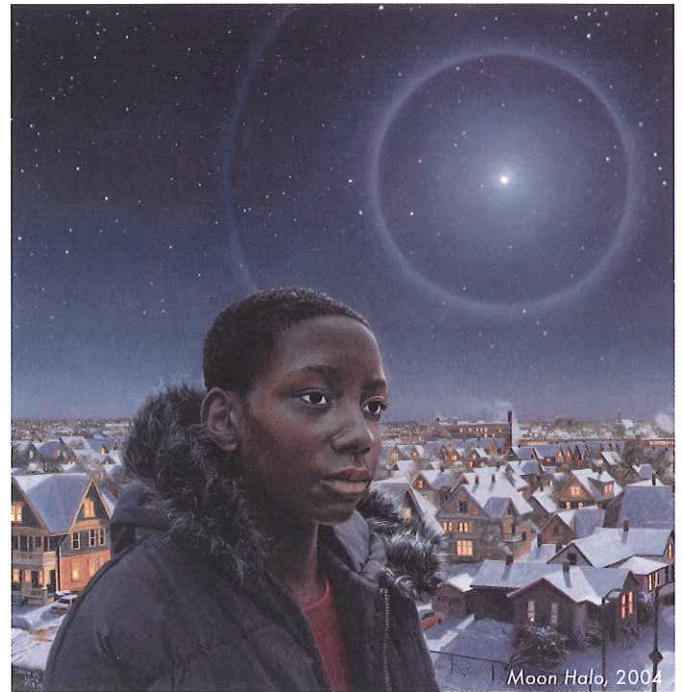
But no camera could evoke this image. It bears the mark of a human hand, of an artist who is devoted to close observation and empathy but is too respectful of his subjects to veer into the sentimental. This is not a viewing but an encounter, and that's exactly how David Lenz intends it.

"If I can get all the details right, if it feels honest and authentic in some way, if you feel like you can almost walk into the painting, then perhaps you can relate to the lives of the persons that are pictured," says Lenz. "Maybe you can feel as they feel—maybe just a little."

Lenz, 45, has spent his career forging connections through his art with the people most marginalized by mainstream society. Inner-city children, rural folk, and people with intellectual disabilities are among the subjects whom Lenz insists we look at, understand, and honor. In 2006, Lenz, a full-time artist for nearly 20 years, beat 4,000 other artists in the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, the first national portrait competition run by the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery. Prizes included \$25,000, exhibition of the winning work at the Smithsonian, and a portrait commission for the gallery's permanent collection. For Lenz, who hadn't exhibited much outside of Wisconsin, it was a burst onto the national scene. It's been the biggest in a string of honors that include a 2008 Wisconsin Visual Arts Lifetime Achievement Award, first prize at a 2005 juried group show at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, and a solo mid-career retrospective exhibit at Milwaukee's Charles Allis Art Museum in 2004.

Smithsonian associate curator Brandon Fortune, who served on the judges' panel, calls Lenz's work visual poetry. "David distills and crystallizes images the way poets distill and crystallize words," says Fortune.

Jeffrey Hayes, a professor of art history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, says, "David combines the highest standards of craftsmanship and design—the quality is painstaking and laborious



and uncompromising—with subject matter that is deeply humane."

Nothing exemplifies this combination more than Lenz's winning entry in the Smithsonian competition, an oil painting called *Sam and the Perfect World*. It concerns a deeply personal subject: his then-8-year-old son, whom Lenz had wanted to paint since birth.

"Sam is a wonderful, funny, sweet kid," says Lenz. "He's a big talker. Sometimes he's a handful. But he's a sweet, sweet boy. He also has Down syndrome."

Down syndrome isn't the first thing Lenz mentions about Sam, and it's not the first thing one sees in the portrait, either; indeed, it can go almost unnoticed. But it's a disability that our society judges harshly. When Sam was born, says Lenz, there was an awkward silence in the delivery room. No one called the baby cute. "Are you going to keep him?" he remembers a nurse asking.

Lenz knew the painting would be a challenge. "How do you talk about the love you feel for your child?" he asks. "How do you couple that with all the discrimination there is out there and wrap it all up



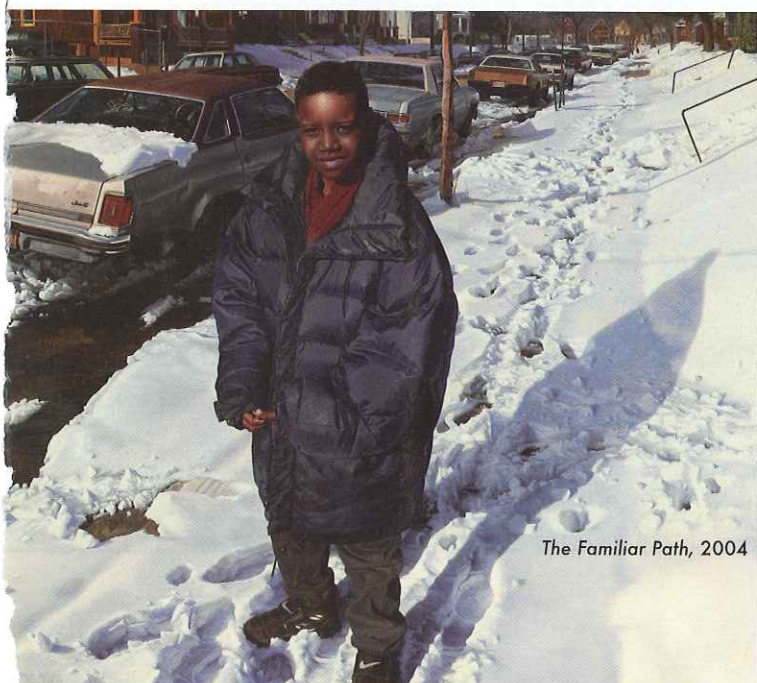
Sam and the Perfect World, 2005



Riverwest, 1990

in one painting?" For the answer, he turned to metaphor. The "perfect world" in the title refers to people without intellectual disabilities. Perfect, Lenz says, is a word people consistently use when cooing at newborns: "Listen for that word—it comes out all the time. Our society is obsessed with perfection."

But so-called "imperfect" people are beautiful, too, Lenz insists. Witness *Sam and the Perfect World*. Sam, dressed in denim overalls and a red T-shirt, stands in front of a lush, almost impossibly idyllic landscape. Above him is an enormous sun with a halo—a symbol of the divine, says Lenz. Directly behind Sam, separating him from the "perfect world," is a barbed wire fence. "God is looking down on the world we've created, at the fence we've built," explains Lenz, adding that Sam assumes the role of presenter in examining the civilization



humans have created. "Sam is not society's accepted definition of perfection. In spite of that, or perhaps because of that, he really does have an important message for everyone to hear."

From his earliest memory, Lenz knew he wanted to be an artist. His father is an art dealer in Milwaukee and his grandfather was a painter who copied European masterworks for customers and often sat his grandson on his knee to offer pointers.

Lenz excelled in painting at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where, with a nod to practicality, he majored in graphic design. But when it came to having his work accepted into student shows, Lenz speculates that his style worked against him: "In the 1980s, realism was deader than a doornail." In his love of realistic landscape—he admires the 19th-century Hudson River School painters, especially Frederic Church—he found a mentor in Tom Uttech, who was then teaching at UWM. Uttech took students on canoe trips in Canada, where Lenz would produce a painting outdoors in a single afternoon. Back home, on Milwaukee's east side, he was inspired to paint cityscapes.

One snowy day in 1990, Lenz put a person in a charcoal drawing of a cityscape. The addition was an epiphany. "It was an artistic high like I'd never known before," he says. "From then on I knew I was going to paint people, and it would be my life's work." That drawing became the beautifully meditative oil painting *Riverwest* (1990), which shows a child gazing down a sledding hill in a city park. "All of a sudden, by including the boy looking out, you're seeing the city through the boy's eyes," explains Lenz. "As you look at it, you think, what does this child think of our city? What does his future hold?"

That his epiphany came by drawing a child—and a black child in a city marked by racial divisiveness—was no coincidence. Lenz's concerns about social justice are fundamental to his art and to his identity. "Children, after all, are the innocent bystanders of society," he says. "They didn't make the city. They don't make the laws or have input in how the schools are run. Whatever happens for better or worse in the city affects children, and they don't have any say about it. So all the issues seem to be that much more heartbreaking, that much more poignant, when they affect children."

Around this time Lenz also decided, after a four-year run as a graphic designer and art director, to devote himself to painting what





Erv's Haven, 2003

he wanted to paint for at least a year. He began painting works featuring black children—which people had warned him wouldn't sell—and showing them at Milwaukee's Lakefront Festival of Arts and other venues. He quickly acquired a following. Commissions and purchases came from private collectors and organizations like Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, the City of Milwaukee, and Boy Scouts of America.

Lenz was painting people, but he wouldn't yet call them portraits. He thought of them as figurative paintings. The children could be any children; Lenz didn't get to know his subjects personally, which he felt would have been intrusive. In a portrait, by contrast, one paints a particular person. Lenz was moved to portraiture as he got to know the farmers who became his neighbors when he and his wife, Rosemarie, bought a piece of land in Sauk County in 1992.

Erv and Mercedes Wagner had owned a small dairy farm for decades. "They have to live a very, very frugal life to get by," notes Lenz. Erv told Lenz he'd gone 27 years without missing a milking, which meant he never left his farm for more than 12 hours. "The day his dad died, he milked cows. The day his daughters were born, he milked cows," says Lenz. "That level of commitment for so little reward is extraordinary." He began painting the Wagners out of admiration and recognition for their lives.

Lenz's 13-by-18-foot studio, built into the garage of his charming-but-modest Shorewood home, is as meticulous as his paintings (no splatters or caked brushes to be seen). Starting with close observation of everyday life, Lenz roughs out an idea with small pencil and oil sketches and then photographs various elements to use as a reference. He rejects the term "photo-realism" to describe his work because he makes so many departures from those photos. "Most of the time the modifications are so dramatic that the final painting bears little or no resemblance to the reference photographs," he says. Social realism is a term he's more comfortable with.

Demand for his work has been steady since 1990. The paintings are labor-intensive. Some years, if the paintings are large, Lenz manages to complete only one. Even with smaller works, 10 or 12 are the most he can finish in a year.

His next big piece will be his prize commission for the Smithsonian. The National Portrait Gallery's mission is to feature portraits of "significant Americans," people who have shaped U.S. history and



culture. Most of them are household names—presidents, scientists, writers, athletes, entertainers. Lenz asked that his subject have “worked tirelessly for people who are disadvantaged and unsung.” After some back and forth, Lenz and the gallery arrived at the perfect subject: Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the founder and honorary chairperson of the Special Olympics. (Sam himself is an eager Special Olympics athlete.) Lenz is delighted with the choice. “Mrs. Shriver has been such a strong advocate for people like Sam,” he says. “She

has led the world to be a more welcoming place for people with intellectual disabilities.”

The commission will bring Lenz’s work to the permanent collection of one of our nation’s most revered cultural institutions. That’s not only an honor for Lenz but a tribute and a message of inclusion to the “unseen Americans” who inspire his art. [W](#)

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Before the Fireworks, 1993