

VINEPAIR

This Artist Painted 99 Beers And Hung Them On A Wall

Nick Hines (August 8, 2017)



Artist Tom Sanford's artistic mantra, he tells me, "is to do the most obvious fucking thing ever." We're sitting on the floor in the Gitler & ___ art gallery in Harlem, New York with a six-pack of Flagship IPA, staring at his latest exhibit: 99 one-foot-tall paintings of beer on the wall. The inspiration song — a simple, folksy, and annoyingly catchy countdown of 99 bottles of beer — is the most obvious idea for a summer art exhibit. But even things that are obvious can have a heartwarming message. In this case, that message is that few things can bond a community together like art and beer.

"I'd [post the paintings on Instagram](#) while I did them, and naturally I'd write something beneath it as I posted," Sanford tells me, a faint scent of paint circulating around us. People would come to Sanford's studio after seeing the project, bring him a beer, he'd paint it, and post a little background story on Instagram. In Sanford's words, "It became less about a depraved alcoholic in his art studio and more about the social interaction surrounding beer."

The exhibit is the culmination of Sanford's posts. And while the feat had a following on Instagram, seeing all of the paintings lined up on the wall takes the message another step further. A plated portrait of a humble Budweiser bottle hangs feet away from a painstakingly accurate rendition of a Flying Dog Snake Dog. There's even a bottle of O'Douls. No two paintings are the same, and each has a touching story of its own.

Sanford rattles off each story just from glancing at the painting. Somehow he's not sweating in his oversized brewery shirt and shorts, despite the humid and hot New York summer air. He

may have drunk a lot of beers since he started the series in May, but he hasn't drunk his memories of the social interactions away.

"I used to make paintings about celebrity culture, and it was somewhat cynical work," Sanford says. "I love those paintings, but at some point I wanted to make work about things that I really love and my everyday life, because life's too short to make art about things you don't really enjoy."

He took the last sip of his Flagship IPA, spun the bottle around on the ground and laughed a little.

"It was also a way that I could get other people to buy me beer."

There's the Budweiser, which holds a special place in his heart from when he drove a Budweiser delivery truck on the Washington Heights route while attending Columbia University.

Then there's the Magners, one of two ciders in the series. He shared the cider at a close friend's father's funeral in the parking lot and poured one out for the friend's dad.

The double Ballentine had perhaps the most meaning. Ballentine is his dad's favorite beer, and it's always been a part of his life. There's two in tribute to pop artist Jasper Johns's Painted Bronze — but it also means that, technically, there are 100 bottles of beer on the wall.

It's almost enough to make you forget about all of the independent-brewery-versus-macro-brewery fights. When I asked if the project threw Sanford into beer politics and feuds, he said he didn't even know that was a thing. The section of the internet carved out for praising the rise of craft beer and for arguing about what is true craft and what is crap somehow didn't touch Sanford.

"While it's about beer, it's not that nerdy," Sanford says. "I'm not reviewing beers, and for practical reasons I'm very positive about all of them. I wouldn't put the beer up if I didn't have an affection for it."

Harpoon Brewing Co. is sponsoring the gallery, and gave cases of beer to Sanford to give out for free during the opening and closing. There are enough beers for anyone who comes in during the August showing to grab a Harpoon IPA or a Harpoon Wannamango from the fridge in the back while they check out the art. In a sense, the community aspect of the series continued on long past when Sanford drank his final beer.

Tom Sanford's 99 bottles of beer started with a single Heineken and turned into an art story about the power of sharing a beer with someone. Now that it's over, Sanford's wife told him he can cut the beer drinking down.

"I need to go on a diet," Sanford says, laughing. Then he stands up, pulls his keys and bottle opener out of his pocket, and lets me know that, for now, his intention to bond over beers is still going strong. "I'm going to grab another beer, you want one?"

[99-bottles-of-beer-on-the-wall](#)