

## Being Scott Seekins

One man's relentless effort to turn his entire life into a work of art.

By Adam Wahlberg

**S**cott Seekins gets up early, usually by 7. Not to punch a clock; he hasn't held a job in thirty-five years. But to present himself as a living, breathing art installation. And since art can't exist in isolation, he doesn't like to waste time.

The first thing he does is decide what to wear. Given the fact that he only wears two outfits—an all-white suit in the light, warm months, a black one when it's dark and cool—this doesn't take long. Distinguished and trim, with almond eyes and high cheekbones, he slips into season-appropriate threads (he owns eight suits of each color), teases out tangly black hair extensions, trims his chopper sideburns and pencil mustache and slides on a thick headband. Only then is he ready to meet the public.

Each day, Seekins leaves his studio in the Warehouse District, has coffee, does some errands, and spends several hours walking around downtown Minneapolis. He heads up First Avenue, stopping to grab coffee, then ducks into the skyways. Later, he might veer down to the river or over to Loring Park. He likes wandering around and seeing how people react to him. Some enjoy his flamboyant appearance and flash a smile; others raise a nervous eyebrow and hurry past. He doesn't mind; he takes it all in and puts it on canvas. He is, as Stewart Turnquist, a program coordinator at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, calls him, "a work of art who makes art."

Seekins doesn't do it because it's lucrative. There is no Guggenheim funding his work. And his is no care-free life—the hours he puts in far exceed the nine-to-five routine. He does it out of necessity—"I don't have any

other skills," he says merrily—and because it's the only thing that has ever made sense to him.

SEEKINS GREW UP in rugged, blue-collar South St. Paul. His childhood was what you would imagine. "I didn't have a lot of friends," he says. "Most of the children grew up thinking about hanging out, getting a car, being on the hockey team. I was interested in chemistry, history, biology, and snakes and lizards. Weird stuff."

He spent most of his time in his basement, playing with his chemistry set, which isn't exactly a formula for popularity. But one day in grade school he picked up a pencil and started sketching. After that, nothing else much mattered. "I drew so often that I had a callous on my little finger," he says.

In 1964, encouraged by his mother, Seekins enrolled in the Minneapolis School of Art, now the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. He struggled his first year, partly due to an obsession with war imagery that sprang from the stories his father told of serving in World War II. "The guy was possessed," remembers painter Leon Hushcha, who entered school with him at the same time. "He would draw battle scenes, tanks, and soldiers. The assignments were secondary. It almost got him kicked out of school."

Seekins eventually broadened his palette, mastered color and line, and earned a BFA degree. Then came the two words that confront every art school graduate: *now what?* He knew he wanted to be a painter, but he didn't know how to get started. Hell, he didn't even know who he was yet. So he went looking for an identity. He found one at a thrift shop in St. Paul called Giesen's. "I'd never seen a place with so much

great stuff—Japanese dresses from the 1800s, Civil War uniforms, all kinds of stars, and little purses made of velvet and silver," he says, still excited at the memory. He found some other items he liked: white linen suits, black frock coats, vests. And something clicked.

He had always felt like an outsider; why not literally wear his status on his sleeve? Plus, he just dug the aesthetic. "Gray or plaid was very Minnesotan, and I wanted something distinct," he says. At the age of twenty-one, he committed to the black and white on the spot and, amazingly, for the rest of his life.

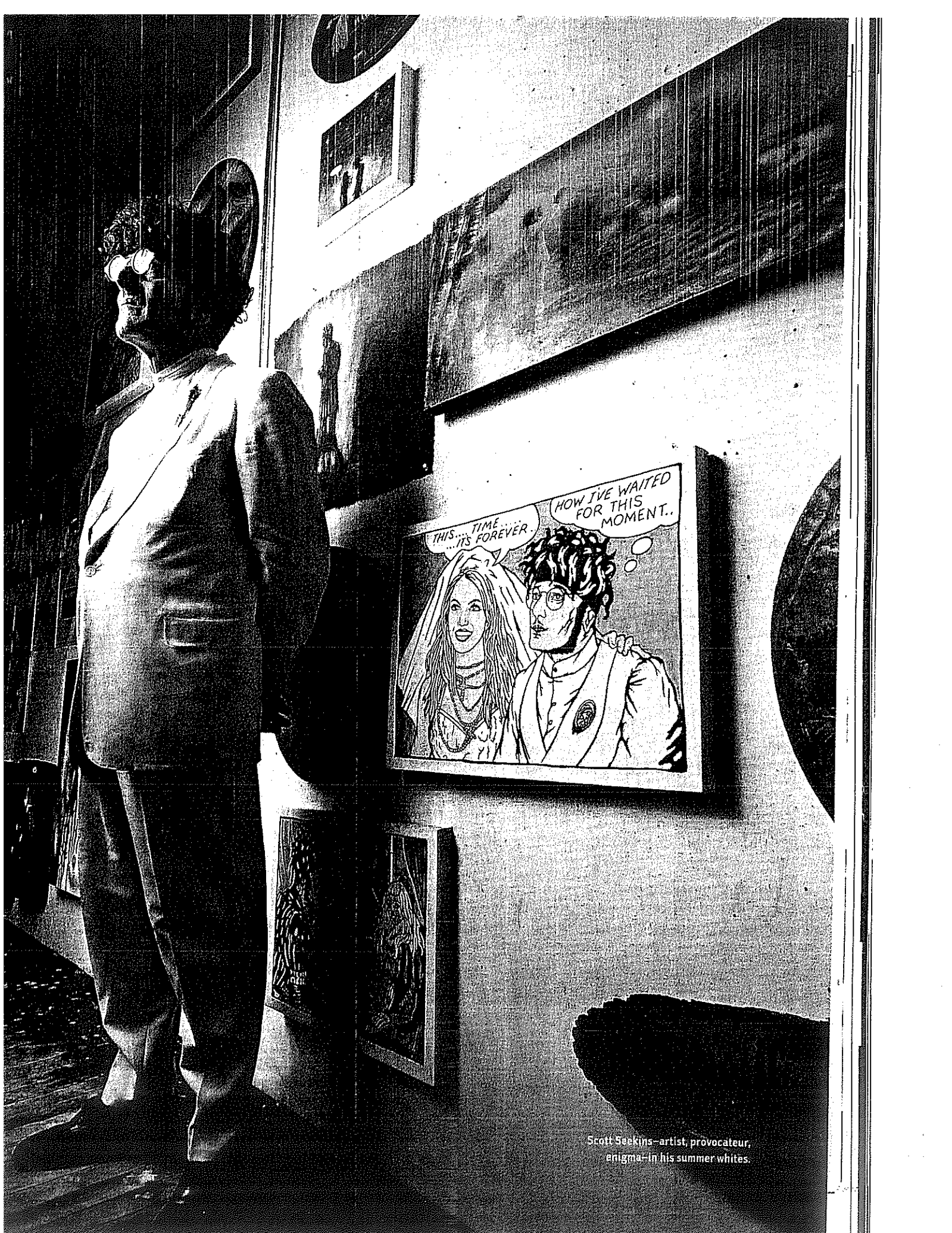
Public reaction was harsh, especially when it came to applying for jobs. "When the people I came to interview with saw me coming," he says, "they would just point and say, 'The door is that way.'" Parents of girlfriends were also a tough sell. "I've literally seen them back down the basement stairs after meeting me and say, 'Oh, my God, where have we gone wrong?'" he says. "Seriously, I've heard that."

His family and friends were supportive, but even they had their doubts. "At first I thought it was silly," Hushcha says. "But I'm fine with whatever Scott does. He's like Yorick from *Hamlet*—a man of infinite jest and most excellent fantasy."

Seekins had found himself. Now he needed to find a career.

AFTER MCAD, HE took a series of day jobs—the most challenging of which was teaching fifth grade at Our Lady of Victory in the northern burbs. ("I would read the textbook one day ahead of the students")—and concentrated on painting at night. He kept this up until 1972 when he made the bold but slightly insane decision to be a full-time artist.

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Scott Seekins—artist, provocateur, enigma—in his summer whites.

# Profile

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It worked out nicely except for one thing: money. He never had any. His solution was brutally simple. "I didn't eat," he says.

In the mid-1970s, he and Hushcha and a handful of classmates and others decided that poverty loves company and formed Fort Mango, an arts collective. They pooled resources, put on shows, sold pieces, and stayed together until 1982. He thrived in the supportive environment.

Thomas Barry, who runs an eponymous gallery in Minneapolis, remembers Seekins's early work. "The thing that stuck out about him was his range," he says. "I showed him back in 1981, and since then I have included him in any group show I do—portrait shows, abstract shows, whatever. He really studies art history and is a master of the materials and the medium he chooses to work in."

During this time, Seekins developed his now-Warholian reputation for being relentlessly public (a gallery opening isn't official until he shows up) and shamelessly self-promoting (he has papered an entire wall in his studio with articles about himself). Yet considering his commitment to mass exposure, he surprisingly isn't naturally gregarious. "He's actually really shy," says Hushcha. "When I met him at MCAD he would just follow me and my friends around, not say much. He still doesn't say much. But he loves ink and he loves the fact that we're talking about him right now."

Seekins managed to eke out a living through the '80s and early '90s, selling, among other things, images of the Madonna, of which he made hundreds. (He still makes them.) "I just had this vision where I felt Mary was a positive energy for me," he says. "It's not a religious thing. It's more that she's a decorative icon, and it makes for pretty art."

But he was still searching for a major conceptual breakthrough. One arrived in 1995, oddly, in the form of Timothy McVeigh. "There was a picture of him in the newspaper after the Oklahoma City bombing, and I decided to sketch myself over his face," Seekins says. "I showed it to Gus Gustafson and Larry Marcus and they

laughed, and from that we came up with the idea that, because I have this distinct dressing style, I could put myself in history like a time machine."

In love with the notion, he painted himself into pop-culture commentaries, including one in which he weds Britney Spears; classical images, placing himself in *The Last Supper*; historical narratives, being the last white man at Little Bighorn; and many more. He continued to dabble in a variety of visual genres—black velvet paintings, anime, Lichtenstein dots—but his paintings mostly featured him, idiosyncratic and unmistakable. He had turned himself into a decorative icon, and by doing so introduced a layer of humor that's not always found in contemporary art.

Some formalists criticized him for being self-absorbed, which he doesn't deny. "I suppose it is, but my thing is irony and passion. I don't go for art that is cold and detached," he says.

Turnquist is one who appreciates Seekins's Zelig approach. "When he puts himself into an established image, it's just that little change, but often that makes a world of difference because suddenly the familiar is unfamiliar, and that's what art is about, opening your eyes," he says. "If you're looking at Adam and Eve in the garden, you say to yourself, 'Damn, I never knew that Adam looked so much like Scott.' [Laughs.] The whole thing goes rolling off and at once it's a pun and it's play and it has all the ways that it lightens us up, but there's also a profundity there."

Seekins has also turned himself into a distinctly Minnesota artist, producing several pieces of himself fly-fishing, which he loves and does in full season-appropriate suit regalia, in area rivers and lakes. Mary Abbe, an art critic at the *Star Tribune* for the past twenty-three years, thinks his legacy will resemble that of another local personality. "He's a kind of Garrison Keillor figure, extremely amusing and droll," she says. "And he maintains a stubborn consistency, which I find charming. He is living performance art on the hoof."

TODAY, SEEKINS IS in the middle of a photo project that features—who

else—himself. He started it two years ago when he decided it would be interesting to be photographed standing on Hennepin Avenue with a sign that reads ART4FOOD. He liked how it came out and decided to do twenty-four more, holding such cryptic messages as PAY ATTENTION, REMAIN CALM, THE SMELL OF PLASTIC IS IN THE AIR, and AREN'T YOU GLAD YOUR LIFE IS ALMOST OVER?

It's classic Seekins, provocative and cheeky. But there's a darkness as well. As his friend Aldo Moroni, the sculptor, points out, "The series of signs is hilarious, but hidden in that is an irony. The sign says ART4FOOD. Well, Scott really is starving to death, so it's a joke, but it's not a joke."

The truth is, Seekins's lifestyle is starting to get to him. He has carpal tunnel syndrome and has endured four hernia operations, which forces him to lean certain ways when he paints (the most comfortable position is to hunch over a canvas placed on the floor). To avoid doctor visits he can't afford, Seekins takes Nexium for stomach pain, daily vitamins, and does some light weightlifting. Although he won't give his age—"In our society, young is everything, and I don't believe in that"—he's probably not far away from qualifying for social security, not that there's much in his fund to tap. "I got my statement the other day, and I think my total is \$2,000, so there is no retirement." On top of everything, he recently learned that his building may be sold, in which case he will have to vacate his studio. It's never easy.

Still, look closely and try to detect bitterness or regret on his face. You won't. He decided long ago to trust that it's possible to survive in Minneapolis as human art. "Every morning when I wake up, I think, 'Wow, I'm glad I'm alive. I want to do things,'" he says.

So he gets up. He puts on his blacks or his whites. He walks, observes, paints. And he does his best to stay healthy. All so he can get up and do it again tomorrow. ▲

Adam Wahlberg is the executive editor of Minnesota Law & Politics.