

Pieces of Him

A few things to know about Ed Lantzer. He can read, but he can't write. He eats almost all of his meals at the Kalkaska Big Boy. He thinks in numbers, and he doesn't believe in chance. He says he has a mean streak.

And one day he had a vision from God.



Ed Lantzer

hasn't celebrated a traditional Christmas in 30 years, because he has no one to celebrate with, but, he says, he knows Jesus died for him, and knows if he were the only human on earth, Jesus still would have died for him. "I celebrate Christmas every day with my work."

Lantzer keeps his lifework inside Kalkaska's old Craft House warehouse, a now-defunct factory that made paint-by-number kits on the edge of town. Here scenes of dolphins and lighthouses and hot air balloons were once mass-produced to make instant Van Goghs of kids all over the country. It feels like trespassing, approaching the warehouse down a narrow, sandy road in Kalkaska's industrial park. The last leaves of autumn have all dropped, and warm eddies of wind swirl ankle-level.

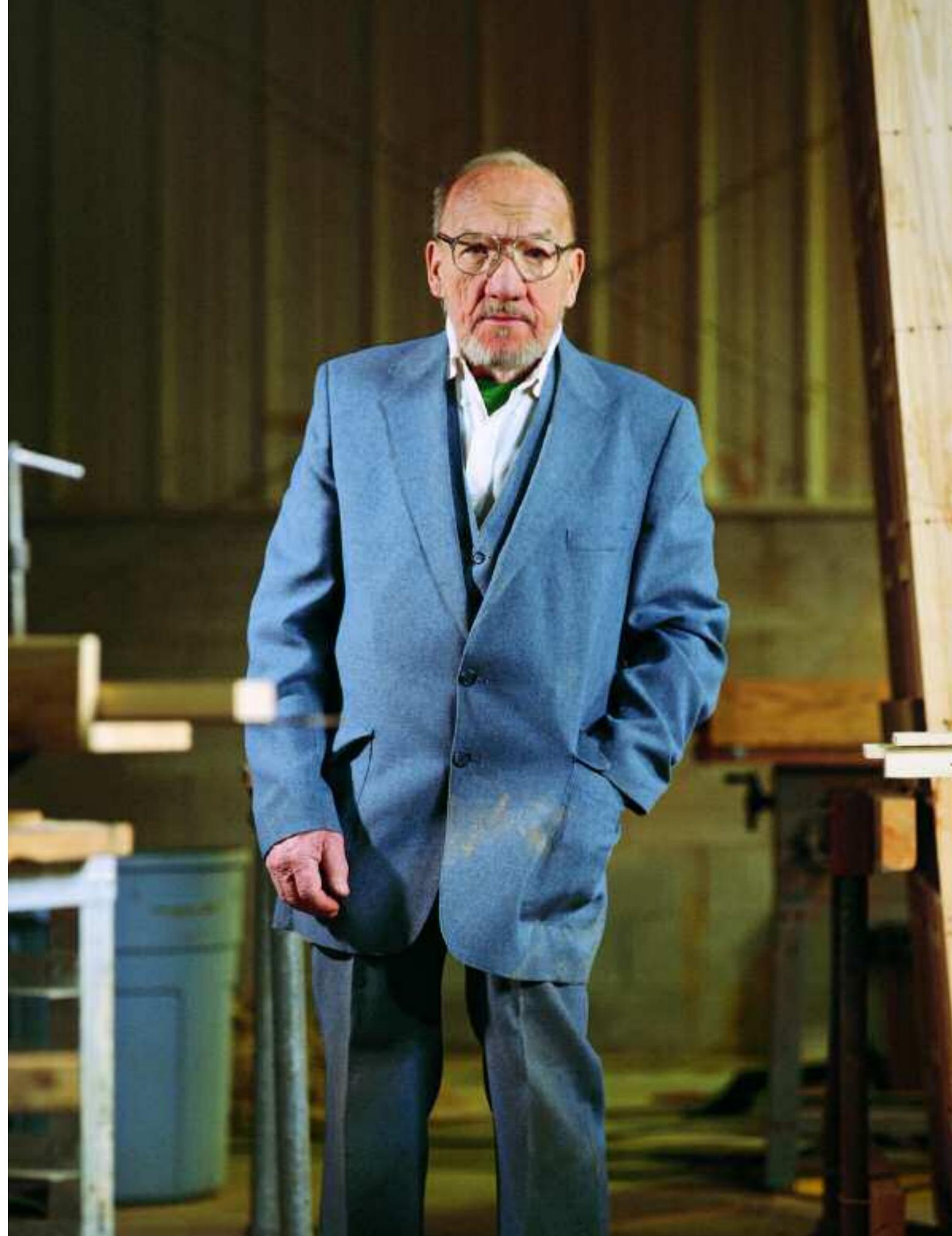
Mr. Ed—that's what he likes to be called—has his pants secured high on his waist with a pale green belt. He wears his Nokia cell phone in a case around his neck and sips Diet Pepsi from a giant convenience store mug. Piles of scrap wood, an abandoned wheelchair and an old washing machine adorn his makeshift gallery, the walls built with prefab pale yellow logs to look like a log cabin. Inside, in an awe-inspiring rectangle, stand a series of 8-foot-tall wood panels impeccably adorned with thousands of tiny wooden diamonds, each cut and placed by Mr. Ed to create elaborate religious mosaics. All of the wood pieces in his masterpieces are their natural hue—none painted or stained—and the pieces shine with ordinary varnish. Even under the fluorescent lighting of the factory, the mosaics' ornate mystery and their luminous iconography—the Garden of Eden, the Last Supper, scenes from Christ's life—send chills up my neck. Mr. Ed calls his oeuvre, a piece stretching 132 feet in all, *My Father's Love*. He began the panels 30 years ago, but believes he was called to make them long before he was born.

Lantzer offers a Diet Pepsi from the fridge—it's in there next to some toast wrapped in a paper napkin with some butter packets from Big Boy. "I don't see you," he tells me, "I see your spirit." I try to do him the same courtesy. He skims over the sludgy parts of his past—divorce, time living on the streets—going all the way back to his upbringing in Kalkaska. And the fever.

When he was seven years old he says he was a phenomenal kid "as far as reading and writing and so on." It was supposed to be some form of genius. Then, he says, "scarlet fever destroyed part of my mind." Afterward, he couldn't remember his name. Lantzer compensated by using a part of the brain that most people don't. "I found out that I couldn't remember geometrics at all so I went to symbolism. I can understand symbols and numbers. I can read. But I can't write. I still can't. Half of my brain is dead." But he's honed the portion still working to achieve astounding results: "There is no such thing as chance on this earth," he says. "I can go down to Vegas and tell you the 'chances' of the next card being turned. I'm not allowed there, because I get rather," he pauses a beat, "lucky."

SMALL AND MIGHTY

PREVIOUS PAGES: A close-up on Ed Lantzer's mosaic panel depicting the Last Supper. **FROM LEFT:** The ornate mosaics Ed Lantzer makes all begin with simple wood pieces cut with four different saws to be identical in size and angle. He is somehow able to create illusions of shapes and figures in his pieces without staining or painting the wood—just working with the natural hue of hardwoods from all around the world. He says 150 different tree species have been used in his work to date.



The miracle here is that Lantzer assembles these giant, intricate religious scenes entirely in his brain. No sketches. No second tries. And entirely with wooden diamonds only a centimeter or so in length. Marquetry—an art form in which small pieces of wood are overlaid onto another wood surface to form a picture—goes back eight generations in Ed Lantzer’s family, but his family tradition dictated wood pieces cut on a 45 or

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90 degree angle. His father taught him the skill. “My dad was a 45-90 man,” he says. “I was able to work with that until I was 15. At that point my dad said, ‘go find your own angle.’ I chose the 30-60.” He gestures toward his work. Those stark angles in the mosaic are unforgiving, but somehow with them he creates the illusion of curves and figures where there are no curves. He shows how some of the figures morph and symbols flip when you walk past them—following you like the Mona Lisa’s eyes.

The warehouse smells sweetly of sawdust, and there is a constant electrical drone ringing high in the ears. Lantzer begins to talk me through the layers and layers of religious symbolism in *My Father’s Love*. His voice is low and resonant, and he stresses choice words the way a seasoned orator or a minister would. The panels hold all of what he wants to say, and he uses them as his crib notes, walking alongside them. We are in front of the Eden panel. Once he gets going, the stories and the symbols flow with astonishing freedom. At first he sounds like a man on some campus lawn pontificating and proselytizing, but there is startling truth in his words as they cut through the sawdusty stillness. “In the Old Testament, there is continually: ‘Bless God.’ How? How do you bless something that made everything, is everything. How do you bless it? The best translation that I’ve personally got to is this: Make your Father proud. He dreamed you. You are in his dream. In the Garden of Eden there were three dreams, none of them impossible. And we’ve never been excluded from the Garden of Eden. We’re still there. This is Eden—the mind of God.” His eyes are wild with wisdom. The edge in his laugh makes you think he knows something you don’t.



The term outsider art has come en vogue as a loose way to refer to the works of artists who are naive, self-taught, visionary, intuitive, eccentric; sometimes mentally ill and obsessive. This flip use of outsider art incenses some art scholar purists, who claim the term was once reserved exclusively for artistic expression of the mentally ill. Ed Lantzer is what those engrossed in outsider art terminology would call a visionary or an intuitive artist, one who makes art that is meant to transcend the physical world and that reveals visions of spiritual awareness. It doesn’t matter what you label it. His is true and honest expression.

Technically Lantzer is only a partially self-taught artist, as the marquetry was taught to him by his father, and he learned carpentry as a trade as a young man. His dad made deals with the carpenter, the plumber and the cabinetmaker in town so his boy would have skills. “Most of my teachers were my relatives,” he says. His uncle the cabinetmaker chewed tobacco, but he wouldn’t spit. “If you asked him a question he’d grunt,” Lantzer says. “There was a yes grunt and a no grunt, and you had to figure out which one was which. If you did the wrong thing he’d go outside and spit, and when he came back in he’d correct you.”

Lantzer married, had children, and built several buildings and houses in Kalkaska, then a divorce and a lost custody battle found him on the streets of Orlando, Florida, just as Walt Disney was buying up huge tracts of land to build his Magic Kingdom. To

complete the illusion of his make-believe world, Disney wanted a nine-acre network of tunnels under the Magic Kingdom so the inner workings of real life—trash removal, utility repairs, costumed characters reporting to work—could be out of public view. Lantzer says he found work using his old trades in the secret underbelly of Disney World as it was being built, assisting in carpentry work and installations.

Soon after, he says he scored a gig at an Orlando company called Checkmate Enterprises, working in a warehouse. By happenstance the big boss was in the warehouse one day to witness Lantzer solve a problem no one else could. The boss, Mr. Frank Murphy, told Lantzer not to report to the warehouse the next day but instead, to report to him personally at his mansion. For nearly a decade, Lantzer worked for Murphy as his personal handyman, on call for remodels and repairs in his several houses 24 hours a day. Lantzer lived in a trailer nearby. “If a door squeaked anytime of the night,” he says, “I would be there.”

Occasionally, Lantzer and his boss would go by boat to Murphy’s place on Little Abaco Island in the Bahamas. Lantzer says Murphy liked to remember what it was like to have nothing—so he took on the role of servant, and waited on Lantzer and cooked for him while they were there. Through this time in Murphy’s employment, the two agreed on a price that Lantzer was to be paid per week, and he was paid whether there were any squeaky hinges to be fixed or not. In his free time, he began to awaken to a strong call—he believes from God—to begin his panels.

On the surface, Lantzer’s work looks like a grand puzzle fitting, but he doesn’t think in puzzle pieces. The work is preassembled—seen in its entirety in his mind’s eye before even the first piece is cut. To create it, he gains entry into his subconscious mind with a beat: “I say a poem, sing a song. Chu Chu Chu Chu. And once I’m there I can run my saws. I can put the inlay together because it’s the same thing.” He gently bobs his head to an invisible rhythm. “Grab a piece, glue it together. Once I’m there I stay just as long as I can. I can stand there 16 hours. As soon as I think, I have to lay everything down and leave, because you cannot create from your conscious mind. As soon as I think, Well, man, I’m thirsty, then Stop.”

Lantzer, while tucked in his subconscious, created *My Father’s Love* panel by panel, over the next 30 years. He made his way home to Kalkaska (he says because there are people there whom he loves, even if they don’t know it), and both he and the art were living in an old schoolhouse on M-66, with no heat and no running water. One day, Paul Hresko arrived at the schoolhouse door.

Hresko, a businessman and vacation rental owner in Elk Rapids, heard about Ed through a woman who was renting from him. Hresko was immediately taken by this man of such little means, who was bartering odd jobs for meals and still said he had all he needed. And Hresko, a religious man himself, was awe-struck by Lantzer’s mastery of his panels’ spiritual content. Wanting to know how

LIFEWORk

Lantzer designed a log gallery inside the old Craft House warehouse in Kalkaska to show *My Father’s Love*, but the work needs a more permanent installation. The piece is 132 feet long and counting: He is now working on a 12-by-8-foot *Presentation of Eve* out of strictly cottonwoods, a soft wood he means to symbolize the softness of the female. About Eve as subject matter for his art, Lantzer says, “The female is about as sacred as I can get.”



“The panels were built for the children. Not for any other purpose. I don’t need notoriety.”

High School. Teacher LaShelle Watson brought a crew of students over to the Craft House warehouse every day so Lantzer could teach them the art of inlay—“an old fella teaching his profession,” he says. Some of his young students were expectant mothers and kids who needed frequent reminders about not using foul language. “The students know that he’s struggled in life,” says Watson. “But just because life is hard, doesn’t mean they can’t do something with themselves. *They give their life meaning.*” While they worked the inlay on old hope chests and tabletops, they spent time in their subconscious, quieting some of their demons.

But what’s to become of the God mosaics has become a million dollar question— they cannot stay inside the defunct

paint-by-numbers factory forever, but do they belong in a museum or gallery, or someplace sacred? “I don’t know anyone who would come to see them as purely an artist or purely a Christian and wouldn’t be moved by the other,” says Hresko. But Hresko, Watson and others are having difficulty helping Lantzer find a final sanctuary for the panels. Finding a space is one hurdle, finding one that is suitable to Lantzer is another. He has always had the panels with him, and talk about what will happen to his art and to whom it will belong when he’s gone can get uncomfortable for him. He’s warm to the idea of putting them on an Indian reservation north of Petoskey. Paul Hresko is intrigued by the chapel on the grounds of the old State Hospital in Traverse City.

Lantzer’s Nokia rings—the ringtone is a tinny Right Said Fred’s “I’m Too Sexy”— and he tells the caller to meet him later at Big Boy. It would bring Lantzer great peace to know what will become of his life work, but he insists, “My job is the inlay.” He has just secured a few pieces of rare blue wood from Colombia for the water in a panel depicting baptism. He is called back to his subconscious expression, to his art, to the ongoing wonders he can’t help but create. ■

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much of what Lantzer presented in his panels was gospel truth, he brought Father James Meyer of Elk Rapids—a Roman Catholic priest and a lawyer—to spend time with Lantzer. Hresko says in their two-hour meeting Meyer’s emotions ranged from tears to open grins. Afterward, he assured Hresko that 95 percent of what Lantzer says in regard to the Bible is spot on. “His understanding of the Bible is as if he wrote it himself,” says Hresko. Touched by Lantzer’s work, he pledged to do whatever he could to help him.

Lantzer needed to vacate the schoolhouse, settle some legal issues and immediately find a safe place for his panels. Hresko became his liaison of sorts, helping him find free legal representation, getting his work inside the old Craft House factory, and securing nonprofit status for Lantzer’s project. The panels aren’t for sale, but Lantzer says he now believes he was called to make them to help the unloved child—spiritually, financially, artistically, any way he can. “The panels are for the children. That’s why they were built—for the children. Not for any other purpose. I don’t need notoriety.”

Word of Lantzer and his work started to spread throughout Kalkaska. Someone donated a green van to him, upgrading his mode of transportation from bicycle. Then he began to foster artistic ability and confidence in kids at Kalkaska’s Northside Alternative

PASSION FOR THE CHRIST

Though the story of Christ is the focus of his work, Lantzer says he’s studied Hebrew, Arabic, Buddhist and Native American languages and cultures throughout his life, flavoring a broad worldview.

For more information about *My Father’s Love*—the work of art and the nonprofit foundation—contact Paul Hresko at 231-264-9193.