

This Beer-Loving Artist Proves the Creative Benefits of a Buzz

By Scott Indrisek Jul 18, 2017

All Images courtesy of Tom Sanford

Who says our vices can't end up making us more productive? For "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall," a project that he thinks of as being between a social-practice performance and the elegant still lifes of [Giorgio Morandi](#), New York artist [Tom Sanford](#) set himself a simple task: Drink, and paint, 99 bottles of beer over roughly the same number of days.

"Most of my socializing happens over beer," Sanford affirms. "Frat boy culture gets overlooked in art—not that I'm endorsing it—but it is a legitimate cultural activity." He's been inspired by a range of beer-art forbearers, from Martin Kippenberger's self-portrait wearing six-pack "handcuffs" to [Édouard Manet](#)'s famous Bar at the Folies-Bergère (which features a cameo from bottles of Bass Ale) and [Jasper Johns](#)'s iconic Ballantine Ale sculpture.



Of course, artists have long looked to beer for inspiration, whether it's 17th-century Dutch genre painters, or [Nicole Eisenman](#) capturing urban beer garden revelry. Perhaps closest in spirit to Sanford's own project is the ongoing, interactive performance [Tom Marioni](#) launched in 1970: an immersive sculpture with furniture and free beer that bears the self-explanatory title *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*.



This is certainly not the first time Sanford has painted beer. In works like *50 Beers* (2010), the titular number of Modelo and Budweiser bottles and cans huddle together on a tabletop. *The Last Slice* (2016) features a tower of beer vessels that precariously hold up other objects (a pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, a copy of the Rolling Stones record *Sticky Fingers*).

Initially, Sanford viewed his beer-painting habit as a variation on [Andy Warhol](#)'s use of soup cans. "He started painting soup because every day he'd have a can for lunch—he's painting his everyday life. I certainly drink a beer every day and, of course, the bottle is so central to the still-life painting."

For this series, though, Sanford is working at a faster clip than usual. He has a simple procedure: Get together with friends or peers at his home studio, drink, and then paint the resulting bottles on

11.75-by-7.75-inch panels of plywood. Along the way, he's posting images of the completed works on his [Instagram](#), accompanied by captions that recap the related boozing sessions.

So far, participants have been a mix of fellow artists—[Aaron Johnson](#), [Eric Doeringer](#), [Alfred Steiner](#)—as well as neighbors and the occasional stranger. (A few weeks back, the artist posted an open call on social media: "I NEED MORE BEER!...Please DM me.") There's a post featuring a painting of Blue Moon, which Sanford drank with another Harlem local (they discussed "celebrity wedding planning" and the dating life of millennials). A depiction of an oversized Lagunitas beer set in a domestic interior is accompanied by its own genesis story, which involves a losing night at a friend's poker table.



In keeping with the familiar jingle that inspired the project, Sanford has stuck to bottles this time around. He admits that all that glass can get repetitive, but he's found ways to jazz up the compositions. For a bottle of Sol that he imbibed on a rooftop in May, he doused the background in a sunny, eye-popping yellow and orange. A painting of the hippie-approved Flower Power IPA is set within a funky, explosive pattern; the bottle's neck is ever-so-slightly curved, as if under the influence of subtle psychedelics.

"A lot of the art I do now, I use it as a way to become more involved in my surroundings, a way to meet people and enjoy my neighborhood more," Sanford says. That can be dangerous—the social component of his project, and a few painting trade deals that it spawned, have left him with a daunting amount of credit at local watering holes.

But overall, the self-imposed limitations of "99 Bottles of Beer" have kept Sanford productive in the studio. It's a trick he has used before, a bit like giving himself an assignment with its own rules and deadlines. In 2012, he drew 100 well-known individuals who died that year; in 2015, he received a commission to make 100 portraits of celebrities from Nevada. Beer bottles might be a little different, but, like people, they each have their own distinctive personality.

Last week, I invited Sanford down to the Artsy offices in lower Manhattan to imbibe in the name of art. I picked a few bottles of Bell's Oberon for the occasion—a Michigan beer whose wobbly logo of a sun has always reminded me of fan-art made by a Dave Matthews Band follower. "This is an attractive label," the artist says, approvingly. "It's good and graphic and simple, and there's symmetry. And the image doesn't bother me at all."

While Sanford is open to all beers, some of them do have more appeal as subjects for paintings. India Pale Ales often come with over-the-top names and corresponding graphics. "They're always so cartoony and baroque," he says. "I like the more classic labels—I like doing the text, as opposed to trying to ape someone else's very labored art."



A few days later, our Oberon bottle pops up on Sanford's Instagram feed. He's extended the graphic elements of the label outward, so that the bottle is in the center of a dynamic starburst pattern (an ode, he says, to fellow artist [Jules de Balincourt](#)).

After the project is complete, that painting—and 98 others—will be on view from August 2nd through 30th at Gitler&____, Sanford's gallery in New York. He envisions a regular series of parties and events, which may include games of beer pong and flip cup. For promotional purposes, he envisions getting someone to come into the gallery each day to be videotaped drinking a beer in the space. ("I don't want to have too many repeat customers," he notes.) The works will each be priced at roughly 250 times the cost of a beer at the corner bodega: \$250 each, with a "six-pack" discount of \$1,200.

When it's all over, it'll be time for the artist to clean up his studio—which has become something of a bottle graveyard—and perhaps detox, at least for a week or two. "The thing about this project," he laments, "is that I'm going to have to go on a diet after it."



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