

# Designer at work: Sean Beauchamp

Southpaw Studios is one of those combination design studio/sign shop/unique fabrication shops. It was born as a sign shop focused on painted signs and has evolved over the years. Sean Beauchamp and Debbie Hansen, his wife, work with the help of Eric Malicoat to turn out custom sign work, public art and custom furniture. Sean was first featured in *SignCraft*'s January/February 2013 issue.

"We cover a lot of ground when it comes to signs and displays and related stuff," Sean says. "We don't do much cut vinyl or digital printing. It's more custom and 3D work."

"My personal interest has always been in things that I could make with hand tools and paint brushes. So projects like that tend to end up on my desk. Projects that need creativity, accurate measurements or digital files migrate

to Eric's desk. Along with his tech savvy, he brings a huge dose of creativity.

"A lot of people in our area have learned that we do unusual things, so we've grown in that direction. It makes the days more entertaining, and it brings us some wonderful customers that we enjoy working for."

Here's what Sean had to say about his approach to design and how the work comes together at Southpaw Studios:

**Computers:** We have five PC workstations—nothing fancy, just Dell computers. We do all our work in CorelDraw Graphics Suite 2017. Eric handles everything that we can't do in Corel—he's an expert at software and seems to be able to make anything happen.

**Hardware:** We have a Vinyl Express plotter



"This was an art exhibit," says Sean, "that we did in a large working gallery. About a dozen artists who work there from Thursday through Sunday, and we were guest artists for about two months. We moved our showroom displays in there and painted this on the wall over that time. In the end, we rolled over it with that dark blue paint and it was gone!"



and a 4-by-8-ft. Vortech CNC router that we drive with Vectric VCarve software[[www.vectric.com](http://www.vectric.com)]. Five years ago, we considered expanding the vinyl side of our business and adding a digital printer. But as the market changed, we decided we wanted to go in a different direction all together. We narrowed the workforce down to the three of us and have been in pursuit of custom projects. We've strayed outside of signs quite a bit—into public art, sculpture, furniture and all sorts of unusual things.

**Fonts:** We have a decent collection of fonts from LetterheadFonts.com, and we really love those. Other times I'll dig around for a free font that has the look I want. They're never very good fonts and often have issues when you enlarge them for sign work. But having come from the brush before the computer, I have the luxury of fixing those problems in my layout or with the brush as I paint.

**Influences:** Noel Weber and Mark Oatis have always been major influences for me. I still sometimes go back to past articles on their work for an idea or inspiration. In recent years, Tom Seibert has also been a big inspiration. Tom is a mural guy with a sign guy background. When you see his work, you see that huge punch of someone who came to mural work from letters. He mixes the two beautifully.

Having Eric in the shop has brought the pinstripping element, which is something I hadn't been around too much. If you look back, pinstrippers were always the ones who were really pushing the boundaries of lettering and signs with chrome lettering, crazy effects and bright colors. Hanging out with Eric at car shows has reminded me of the things that made me excited about being a sign painter in the first place.

**Workspace:** Our shop totals 4500 sq. ft. Our main building is 3000 sq. ft., where we have a large finishing room for paint and assembly, and a small room for the plotter and another small room for our neon work. There's also a large fabrication room for the heavier production and welding.

Upstairs we have our offices and a nice showroom area. I think that's really important. If you want to sell what you can do, you have to be able to show examples and photos to prospective customers.

Over the past couple years we've expanded into half of the adjacent building. There we have our CNC router, panel saw and substrate storage in one bay. In the other bay we have



"For a lot of my work, I first do a pencil sketch, then finish it out with Sharpie markers. Then I scan and vectorize them. These are projects in my design space that are in the works right now."



"This shows about two-thirds of our paint room. Behind me, as I took this photograph, was another worktable, our paint storage area and our sign kits."



"This is our fab room where we do our welding and main fabrication work. The neon room is off to the right."



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"This is something we are doing a lot of — entry and lobby walls. A specialty architect did the design for this curved wall in a bank, and we did the fabrication. We seem to have a knack for working with other designers and helping them make their ideas a reality, and it's become a nice niche for us."



"We did a large illuminated version of this design for the storefront and another smaller illuminated version, but this one is my favorite. It's all hand-painted and is about 8-by-8-ft."



"We've done a lot of work for this bank. Their original logo design was by Rademaker Designs. We add the dimensional features that bring it to life on this 8-ft. wide entry sign."



"There are red LEDs behind the wooden flames which are in front of the tile mosaic that matches their pizza oven inside. The carved lettering on this 30-in.-by-12-ft. sign is finished with 23K gold-leaf."



our metal storage and our chop saw. It's great to have all that in one place because it takes up a lot of space.

We have a pretty unique setup, and it's generally a wreck. [Laughing.] I have a sign friend who has a very organized shop with almost nothing ever out on any of the flat surfaces. That's not us. We always have plenty of projects underway, and they spread out and overlap each other.

**Design time:** First thing in the morning we usually go over what has to get done today, then I try to get some work done before I get stuck in my office. I often think, "Later, once everyone goes home and there's no interruptions, I'll do my design work. Or maybe I'll take it home to do it there." That has been my plan for years, but it never worked that well. [Laughing.]

Then I may think to myself that I'll do it Saturday. Then maybe I'll do it first thing Monday—but I still put it off. Then it simply has to be done and I have to go on a binge to get several designs done. It's not the best way for creative design to happen [laughing], but that's how it works. I like to think that while I'm walking around and putting it off, I'm still working on the design in my head.

Lately, my design projects have been around things like public art and furniture. I don't actively look for logo designs, partly because it's hard for me to get to them. About the only time I take one on is if I really like the product and they really want me to do it.

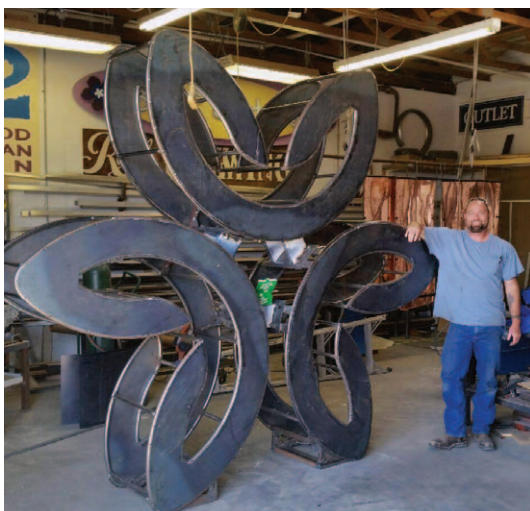
Today, I'm also less likely to do several designs for the customer to choose from. Instead of giving ten versions to someone, we now tend to say, "We would like to do it like this, and here's why..." It just works better that way. **SC**



"I hand-painted this one in the shop on three 4-by-10-ft. aluminum composite material panels. Of all the crazy stuff we build, I still love hand painting the best. I first did their logo 14 years ago, and just did the update on last month."



"This sign was a sign craftsman's dream. It had everything on it—including a rather challenging installation around some existing poles. I built the wrought iron in the shop, Eric built the cabinet, we bent the neon in-house and we did the gold leaf and smalt panel of top. We got to be sign painters, engineers, gilders and more. It was designed by Rademaker Design."



"Dignity Health Care was looking for a wow factor feature for the lobby in one of their hospitals. We looked at a few options, then I suggested using a 10-ft. tall version of their logo. We built this out of steel, with all the seams welded and ground. It weighed over 2000 pounds and it does just what they wanted it to do."