

The school of arts & sciences: Todd Siler takes DaVinci Award for breaking down the walls



Todd Siler's multimedia work fuses diverse art with scientific concepts. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC

By Peter Jones

Calling Todd Siler an artist is like calling Cirque du Soleil a circus.

The words are accurate on a broad level, but do not truly describe the diversity or the spirit of either.

Aurora's Todd Siler is the 2011 recipient of the World Cultural Council's Leonardo DaVinci World Award of Arts. Siler has advocated full integration of the art and sciences for decades. Photo: Steve



Among other descriptors, Siler is also an author, an educator, an inventor and a researcher into the nature of creativity.

More specifically, Siler, 58, is a sculptor and a painter, but he is no steadfast right-brainer. He holds patents for several computer and printing-related inventions.

Over the years, the [Aurora](#) resident has consulted with interests as varied as major corporations and the Cherry Creek School District while promoting his ideas to education and business environments.

While many others have advocated a multidisciplinary approach, Siler has been on the forefront of championing full integration of the arts and sciences for more than three decades.

In 1986, Siler became the first visual artist to earn a Ph.D. at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), and he has been known to apply everything from plasma physics to neurology into his eclectic multimedia creations.

In 2006, Siler proposed an "environmentally friendly" alternative use for controlled

nuclear fusion with an art exhibit at [New York City's Ronald Feldman Gallery](#).

The son of an aspiring concert pianist and a bio-medical researcher, Siler was a child prodigy. In the years since, his work has been displayed at the [Museum of Modern Art in New York City](#), the [Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow](#) and the [Israel Museum in Jerusalem](#), among many other venues.

This month, the [World Cultural Council](#) awarded Siler its [Leonardo DaVinci](#) World Award of Arts.

"This recognition is for his extraordinarily creative and innovative contributions to contemporary and visual arts, for stimulating creativity, inspiring innovation and uniting art and science to enrich the experience of creative learning," the council's announcement said of Siler.

The Villager recently asked the DaVinci recipient about his approach to art and science, and about being a modern-day Renaissance man.

Villager: What does DaVinci mean to you as a 21st century artist?

Siler: He was probably the quintessential inventor and visionary that we point to from all cultures. When you look at the body of the inventions and innovations he articulated and drew, they really reveal a mind that is curious about everything. Obviously, he was one of the most inventive spirits.

Villager: He also typified what we have historically called the Renaissance man. You have put that approach in the present tense when you talk about the confluence of today's arts and sciences.

Siler: When you think of [Albert Einstein](#), he was every bit what DaVinci was. We don't tend to think of Einstein drawing and visualizing things in as rich and varied ways as DaVinci. But Einstein was a poet in the way he looked insightfully at things.

Maybe a better example would be Steve Jobs. Here is a person that every human being on the planet can relate to. He took the sum of his knowledge and applied it in a way that transformed our technology. He had a very fertile imagination.

Villager: Jobs was an innovator, but was he an artist?

Siler: I would regard him as an artist in the way he visualized and conceptualized. It's not simply drawing, painting, sculpture or new media. It's representation of thought. Under that larger definition, you can see how Jobs would be an artist. His representations of thought were visualized through computers and our experience with computers.

Villager: When saxophonist [Ornette Coleman](#) improvises, is there science involved?

Siler: There is. He may not call it science, but certainly there's a mass underlying it with structures and patterns that are very, very precise.

Villager: You've written a book called Think Like a Genius. The title makes it seem as though we're all capable of sheer brilliance.

Siler: I think we are. Genius is in every human being in some way, shape or form. But most people don't discover it for hundreds of reasons. Tapping into that and being aware of that is a self-discovery process.

Villager: How does a workaday shlub tap into his genius?

Siler: Something happens by catastrophe, urgency or by accident. That individual may end up being inspired by something that comes out of the blue. It could be a problem or a challenge in his office that is unsolvable by anybody else, and suddenly this everyday person looks at the problem very differently and doesn't need any more than a doodle on the back of an envelope to suggest his idea. It happens all the time. I'm in workshops with people that have all kinds of expertise in an area, and oftentimes they're not the ones who make the breakthrough. It comes out of leftfield.



Villager: Have you discovered a scientific or artistic discipline that simply doesn't relate to other areas?

Siler: If people have this notion of the scientist working with a lab coat on, they're not inclined to see scientists as artists or vice versa. Scientists are every bit as creative as artists. You have people in theater arts who would say what Steve Jobs did is a form of theater arts because he's entertaining us and he's using every aspect of the human experience to make the experience of using computers awesome.

The best people in the theater arts, the ones who are doing really forward-reaching presentations are often integrating the different sensibilities we're talking about. Some might say the Blue Man group is like that or an illusionist like David Copperfield. Cirque du Soleil is incredible engineering. Look at Avatar by James Cameron. He is doing art, science and technology – all of it.

Artists are just as capable of making breakthroughs happen or raising fundamental questions that scientists have to deal with. MRIs are getting artists to think about the human experience in a very different way. There's a beautiful confluence now where people are thinking beyond their limited definitions.