



**Susan Velasquez**

## Chocolate painter extraordinaire, Sid Chidiac, wants to give back

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Marilyn Monroe in chocolate  
Photo courtesy of Sid Chidiac

Sid started off his artistic career in Sydney, Australia at the age of twenty-three. He told mythological stories using fourteen leadlight panels, which immediately won him the Young Achiever award in 1994. He is now an acclaimed and esteemed oil and chocolate painter, who is revered all over the world. He initially studied his craft at one of Australia's finest art schools, The Julian Ashton Art School, where he had the privilege of studying under Nigel Thompson, a two time Archibald Prize winner. After travelling around the world and visiting 20 countries, in 2002 he settled in New York. His first solo exhibition in NY was at the Australian Consulate, immediately followed by his second in Times Square at Chashama Theatre, where he worked on a huge rendition of The Last Supper.

He then started creating pieces made entirely of chocolate and was a huge success at the Sixth Annual Chocolate Show in Manhattan, where he garnered major press for his chocolate portraits.

Always a great supporter of charities, he often donates several paintings to local charities that benefit children in need, and young cancer patients. He also supports several organizations such as Michael J Fox Parkinson's Foundation, and Sydney Children's Hospital Foundation.

Since 2003 Sid has enjoyed extensive press coverage all over the world, has been sponsored by Berry Callebaut chocolate in Belgium, and has been commissioned by a private sponsor to paint the history of the Phoenicians to modern day Lebanon. Sid receives invitations to exhibit all over the world and has received a gold medal award for painting in a new medium, being chocolate. His chocolate paintings

now hang in the chocolate museum in Barcelona. His artwork has hung in the American Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon and also in the Australian Embassy in Beirut.

Having achieved such great success and accolades and with his popularity only gathering momentum, Sid says he feels so grateful for all his success over the years and wants to give back with his extensive charity work. He believes his fellow Australians in particular should work together on projects around the world, thereby advancing the cause for everyone involved. He also practices this mantra himself.

We asked him about some exciting future projects and exhibits he has lined up, his spiritual and charitable side, and where he wants to take his work and art.

**Your innovative chocolate art has really taken off around the world. What inspired you to initially start working in chocolate and what are some of the logistical challenges in working with it?**

Well chocolate is something everyone loves and no one can resist. It is a pleasure to eat and I wanted to make it look pleasurable for the eyes and give people the temptation of wanting to eat it after looking at it, although it isn't meant to be eaten. The object is a painting but even if you don't like it, you will still want to eat it because it's chocolate. There isn't a problem working with chocolate as body art, as the body temperature itself keeps the chocolate warm and therefore preserves it. Chocolate actually sits very well with body temperature. I also do all the paintings indoors so the temperature inside doesn't affect the chocolate either and makes it easy to work with. I don't want to give away how it is done but my chocolate paintings are 100% edible. I came to New York from Sydney, and I found that in Sydney I didn't get the encouragement for my paintings as I do here. If you can lift your head up and make something of yourself in New York everyone will embrace you. The moment I made it in New York with my chocolate paintings and other art pieces, I became famous all over the world. After my initial success in New York I became well known in Paris, and the oldest press agency and head media of the world, AFP, did an article about me. At the time I didn't know who they were and Emma Charlton had to wait two hours to see me, as I had three other interviews before her. She waited patiently and that interview went all around the world. By the next day I was featured in the media of 55 countries, translated into several languages, just from that one interview. I was also interviewed by the BBC and other top media outlets from around the world and that's how my career skyrocketed. I guess for me as an artist, if I didn't make it, I would never be starving as I could always eat my paintings.

I would one day like to have a chocolate exhibit near the United Nations and even open up my own Chocolate Museum in New York, made from real chocolate of course.

**You have upcoming exhibits in New York, Abu Dhabi and London, where you plan on doing a portrait of the Queen. Please tell us more about these exciting projects.**

The exhibit in London is about eating food, and they liked my work, so invited me to participate. I told them I wanted to do a portrait of the Queen and since then the media attention has been intense. The press wants to hear from me and they want me to attend the exhibit opening in London, and also said

they would love to have one of my pieces. I will also be painting people's bodies in chocolate. I will paint a black model in white chocolate and a white model in dark chocolate, for the contrast. I do this for all my openings around the world. I get models and paint their whole bodies in chocolate and people try to touch the model and even lick them. I should get models that might enjoy being touched as a lot of the time people can't help but touch them.

At an exhibit last September 27th, called Chashama for The Durst Foundation, the models actually complained about being touched in inappropriate places while painted in chocolate. This occurred because sometimes people take the brush and want to brush the models in chocolate. I have done appearances with chocolate painted models where a top celebrity couldn't resist but to sign his name between the model's legs in chocolate. I've had another celebrity from Hollywood say to me "is my wife watching?" as he wanted to sign his name between the model's legs. The celebrity's wives come to me and ask me not to let their husband's paint the models. At another event for the Michael J Fox foundation, I had a man try to remove the model's bra while she was in chocolate. The temptation for people to touch the chocolate is very strong so now on my postcards I have put the saying "don't lick, just look." The exhibition in London is very excited about my chocolate addition.

The three exhibits, first in London, which is on September 25th, Abu Dhabi and New York are all back to back. So I am going to be doing a lot of flying back and forth for a few days to try and make an appearance at each. I have sent my work to London in advance for their exhibit, but they also want me to paint people's bodies in chocolate. I am not sure if I will do that. Of course it is more publicity if I go, and therefore I would be going for the media coverage. It is a funny story as to how I started painting people's bodies in chocolate. I was invited to do an exhibit in an Austrian Castle, at a White Party there. One of the organizers there asked me "what else can you do?" There was a lot of media there, several newspapers, TV, and radio, as well as 3,000 people in attendance, which also included the Australian Ambassador and Council. There were children there too and all the model was wearing was a thong. She was an older woman but she had a good body for her age. I started painting her in front of everyone but initially I was embarrassed and shaking. All the attention was on me and I was embarrassed about accidentally touching her breast, while painting her. She said "don't worry about it". Afterwards I was told the real model was this very attractive young girl but she turned up late, so they took the old woman off the street and she was a prostitute. My second exhibition in Austria was in Vienna, and I was exhibiting at the museum there.

I also have my own private exhibit in Sydney this coming January, featuring my oil paintings.

### **Who do you feel has influenced you the most in your life and your career?**

I like the art of Michael Angelo, and I also like Picasso. In a way I look at his artwork as unfinished although he began a new style. A lot of people did not like it but it made him very successful because that was his own path, and that's what I like about him.

I started out with chocolate and it's been a great journey for me and it made me very successful. While

I was at school in Sydney they were telling me that Lebanese people are good at business but not in the art world and I was made to feel like I wasn't achieving anything. Then I studied with Nigel Thompson and he was a mentor to me. We became good friends but unfortunately Nigel had cancer twice and has since died. I helped him teach a class for beginners. One day I called him and he told me he was dying, and I said "you're talking to me, so you are still alive." I told him I would speak to him later and soon afterwards I heard he had died. I felt terrible about this. In the beginning he didn't want me to paint nudity, children, flowers or animals. In rebellion I sketched a baby, animals, and flowers. We had a fight over this but I told him I paid a lot of money to have him as my teacher and we soon became good friends. Whatever I do around the world I always think of Nigel and his early influence on me. He had a great sense of humor and would joke around a lot. One day he joked and told me to go to the park and steal a woman's bag to get the money, as I was short and needed to buy a very expensive tube of paint. He told a fellow student a couple of times that the head she was painting was too small in comparison to the body. He marked her paintings four times and she was still making the head too small. So in exasperation Nigel would joke "women have less brains than men anyway, so leave it." He just didn't want to fight with her anymore. So I joked and said all the students were afraid of him after that. He was an incredible person and he once did a portrait within fifteen minutes. I first knew Nigel in the mid 1990's and he died in 1998. He was truly a great man. The Julian Ashton Art School, where he taught, still uses the same techniques and the teachers there are all great. Marjorie Cento, a student at the school and in her 80's, was also an influence on me and a great woman. At one point the school almost shut down but now it has totally recovered and has hundreds of students. All the top Australian artists come out of that school. You can dedicate all your time to painting there and paint non-stop.

Another great influence on me was Anita Durst, who is the founder of Chashama. She invited me to be in the window at Times Square, when I first came to New York. I saw a girl painting in the window and asked who I should speak to so I could do the same. I was directed to Anita and her organization, as she helps a lot of artists. In New York she has helped over 1,000 artists over the years. For more information about her organization, go to their website at [chashama.org](http://chashama.org).

My Lebanese background obviously influences me as well. In my opinion, Lebanon is the number one place in the Arab world to become a famous singer or artist. A lot of our ancient artworks are now in other countries such as Turkey, as years ago it was stolen by the Turkish Empire. We are trying to get them back, such as King Sidon's coffin, which is 2,500 years old. King Sidon's body is the most well preserved full body to exist. The Lebanese Artist, Kahlil Gibran wrote the book called the Prophet and the famous verse that President John Kennedy said "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country!", actually comes from that book.

**You do a lot of charity work. What else do you enjoy doing when you are not creating your amazing pieces and where do you find the most inspiration for your art?**

I like to exercise and sometimes I just feel overwhelmed with inspiration. I always have something to paint and now that I am not travelling as much I feel more focused and happier than I have in a while. I am now focusing more on myself and the energy that is coming out of me, rather than all the outside distractions you feel while travelling. A friend of mine told me that whenever I go into his store I seem to

attract more customers, so my energy is very positive. I truly believe you get back what you put out in life. For the first time I also feel more relaxed and more at peace. Now I can concentrate on how I feel and express that in my oil paintings more so than with chocolate. I feel the need to focus more on my oil paintings.

I also feel inspired by my work for the United Nations. I have been a Representative to the United Nations World Lebanese Culture Union for 2 years now. Part of my work there is protecting and enhancing women's rights around the world. I am also involved in a project in Lebanon to help restore the dwindling Cedar Trees in the Middle East. I would like to see as many cedar trees planted in Lebanon as possible, as it takes them 20 years to mature. Many are destroyed by lightning strikes, especially in the mountain areas. They are now installing antennas in these areas to deflect the lightning from the trees, but these are very expensive to install. You can visit [plantcedar.com](http://plantcedar.com) to support this cause and find out more information on ways you can help.

**You are organizing a charity run in December 2010, which will feature performances by top Australians. Please tell us more about this event and how people can participate.**

The run is taking place in New York on December 4th and 100% of the earnings will go to a top charity to feed women and children in need at Christmas time. If people want to join in they can register at my website, where I will put up a form for them to fill in and register for the event. We are also looking for additional sponsors and would be more than happy to accept any donations that come our way. Closer to the event I will be promoting it more. The run begins at Battery Park and then goes up the West Side Highway and ends at the Chelsea Piers. The run is 3.5 miles and people will be dressed in red like Santa Clause. Being dressed as Santa and being involved in the run is their gift to support American people in need around the holidays. A top Australian celebrity will be there for the opening and I am working on getting other celebrities involved as well. I grew up seeing this charity and the work they do both here and in Sydney. You see them on the streets of New York on many cold winter days, collecting money to support less fortunate people, and I like the work they do, so I want to support them.

You can find out more about Sid Chidiac and his incredible art at [sidchidiac.com](http://sidchidiac.com)

Slideshow: Delicious art



