

AMERICAN-GROWN HERO

The Man Who Puts Flowers on Your Head

Gleefully subversive, Mud Baron is a Los Angeles-based provocateur who photographs anyone from school children to Oscar winners as they balance blooms on their heads.

Mud Baron is a nonprofit school garden activist who is trying to reverse the asphalt tide of Los Angeles by teaching students and empowering educators to grow food – and flowers – across the region. He’s the program coordinator for **Muir Ranch**, a student-run farm at Pasadena’s **John Muir High School**, one of the frequent places where portraits are taken of subjects with flowers on their head. His artistic muses may be Frida Kahlo, Carmen Miranda or Caravaggio’s depiction of Bacchus, and his social media presence is hard to ignore with 19k Instagram followers (@mudbaron) and more than 27k Twitter followers (@cocoxochitl) who can’t get enough of Mud’s evocative people-and-flowers imagery.

Mud often uses student-grown artichokes, cardoons, dahlias and David Austin roses from the three-acre Muir Ranch grounds, but he also relies on donations from flower farming friends like **Mel Resendiz** and **Diana Roy** of **Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers** in Fallbrook, Calif. The farm’s South African flora is uniquely suited for making dramatic, large-scale head-pieces, and Mel likes supporting Mud’s causes, saying, “I love seeing the way Mud uses our flowers in his trendy floral accessories, allowing men, women and children alike to show off their personal style and learn a little more about protea.”

We recently caught up with Mud for a Q&A about his social media series that’s documented more than 10,000 subjects since the project started:

SFJ: How do you describe your work?

MB: I’m a floral eccentric who has a hobby of giving flowers away. I believe everyone should experience flowers on a daily basis. I’m also an agriculture teacher, a farmer and an artist.

SFJ: How did “Flowers on Your Head” get started?

MB: It began right after Valentine’s Day five or six years ago when the local Trader Joe’s store called to offer me all their ex-

tra flowers. I had taken them to Los Angeles City Hall to give to the mayor’s office and to city council members and their staff, but I had a few extra buckets of flowers. The leftovers went with me in my truck to a project site and as I was handing out flowers and plants to the kids, there was this little nine-year-old girl holding flower bunches in her arms and they were almost piled on her head. I looked down at her and I thought, ‘Oh my God, that is so good. Let’s do that.’”

SFJ: What prompted you to photograph her?

MB: Taking pictures is part of my practice as a nonprofit project director, where you have to use digital storytelling to engage people to support your work. I learned this from **David Brower**, my first boss when I moved to California. He was Ansel Adams’ publisher and he taught me that if people see the Sierra Mountains, they would want to save them. So I use that idea all the time to let people know how amazing kids and flowers are so that we can have school gardens.

SFJ: What places has #flowersonyourhead taken you?

MB: I’ve been to Coachella, the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles and Venice Art Crawl. Last year, I photographed **Mahershala Ali** all decked out in proteas at the Telluride Film Festival. I was the good luck charm, because he won best supporting actor for “Moonlight.” This year, I photographed Oscar nominee **Greta Gerwig** with wax flowers and grevillea atop her head. Jet Blue sponsored Flowers on Your Head at the Arroyo Seco Weekend last summer, which was Tom Petty’s last big outdoor concert.

SFJ: Do you consider yourself a performance artist?

MB: I’m a floral troublemaker, and I’m also a little bit of an introvert. People don’t believe that, but when I’m doing Flowers on Your Head, it’s a role, like any actor would have. It’s either



beautiful or it isn’t – that is my only filter. Do I get paid or not? It doesn’t matter. Who is it? That doesn’t matter. Is it an Oscar-winner or a second grader? Doesn’t matter. Is it beautiful?

SFJ: Has Flowers on Your Head changed people’s attitudes about school gardens?

MB: You would think a kid in a garden isn’t a hard sell, and yet here we are with L.A.’s public schools having 5,000 acres of asphalt. Sometimes I get tired of trying to affect change in a solid, linear, policy type of way. That’s when I say, screw it – I can be an artist. I can do beauty. And that will be my irrepressible gift.

SFJ: In spite of local bureaucracy, it seems as if you have built important community connections. Which groups are you working with?

MB: As part of Muir Ranch’s programming, we host the training sessions for **Los Angeles County Master Gardeners**. They are an exceptional group because there are thousands of them and I enable their troublemaking. They’ll go on to build a senior garden in Hollywood or a homeless garden in Santa Monica or a school garden in the Hollywood Hills. We also work with horticulture companies across California to take their leftovers – plants, plugs and seedlings – and distribute them monthly through a program called **Plug Mob** that supplies teachers and anyone involved with gardens and kids.

SFJ: Where do you create your best work?

MB: My favorite place to arrange is on the tailgate of my truck.

If I ever open a floral studio, I’ll cut off the back end of my 2001 Toyota Tundra and put it there, because that’s my best arranging table.

SFJ: What are your essential tools?

MB: I own a fancy camera, a Leica, but the vast majority of my photos are taken on my iPhone 7. One of the best investments I’ve made is a \$300 Samy’s Cameras light rig. Even though I have a \$150 pair of Japanese pruners, like any florist, I have a crappy pair of pruners that I just love.

SFJ: What is your next big undertaking?

MB: I really want to build a children’s garden in Los Angeles. I dream of a five-acre space that isn’t merely a garden, but a dynamic urban farm. There are 15 million people in this part of Southern California who don’t get to experience a farm. As a farmer, I want more people to experience how things happen – literally, with sun, dirt, irrigation, water, growth, renewal. Whatever notoriety and attention I can push to help make a children’s garden a reality, that’s my end-game goal.

NOTE: Since the time of this interview, the Pasadena Unified School District announced plans to close Muir Ranch, “the teen jobs program that looks like a school farm.” Mud suggests supporters contact PUSD board president Roy Boulghourjian at boulghourjian.vruyr@pusd.us to express concern. ■