

Swimming champ canvasses for a job

THERE SEEMS TO BE something sinister about the work of this clean-cut American that beguiles the Chinese reporter. "Do you think your work is pessimistic?" he asks, and later: "I see something violent in it."

Like the paintings on exhibit at the Hong Kong Convention Centre — a combination of mixed-media abstracts and serene oil or water-color landscapes — the lunch-time exchange between Greg Burns and the *Chinese Daily News* journalist is open to interpretation.

"I know what you're trying to imply," smiles Burns, who was struck by polio at the age of one. "You want to know if my disability has anything to do with my art. If I'm frustrated and angry at the world. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"We all have handicaps, we all have challenges — I just deal with them as part of the real world. I'm not a political painter. I paint what I see and I like to inject humor and the beauty of nature into each piece. The hardest part is knowing when to stop before I ruin it," he laughs.

There is a glow to the scribe as he suddenly warms to Burns, as most people do. He then asks, somewhat rhetorically: "So, you love Hong Kong?"

"No," Burns answers with his characteristic Tom Cruise smile. "Hong Kong doesn't inspire me — it doesn't feed the heart. But it has taught me to paint abstract — perhaps through lack of another outlet."

Greg Burns the artist, 36, also happens to be communications coordinator for Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) — a post he's held for the past six months — and a world-record swimmer. The two points are linked because

KFC was one of Burns' first sponsors at the Barcelona Paralympics two years ago.

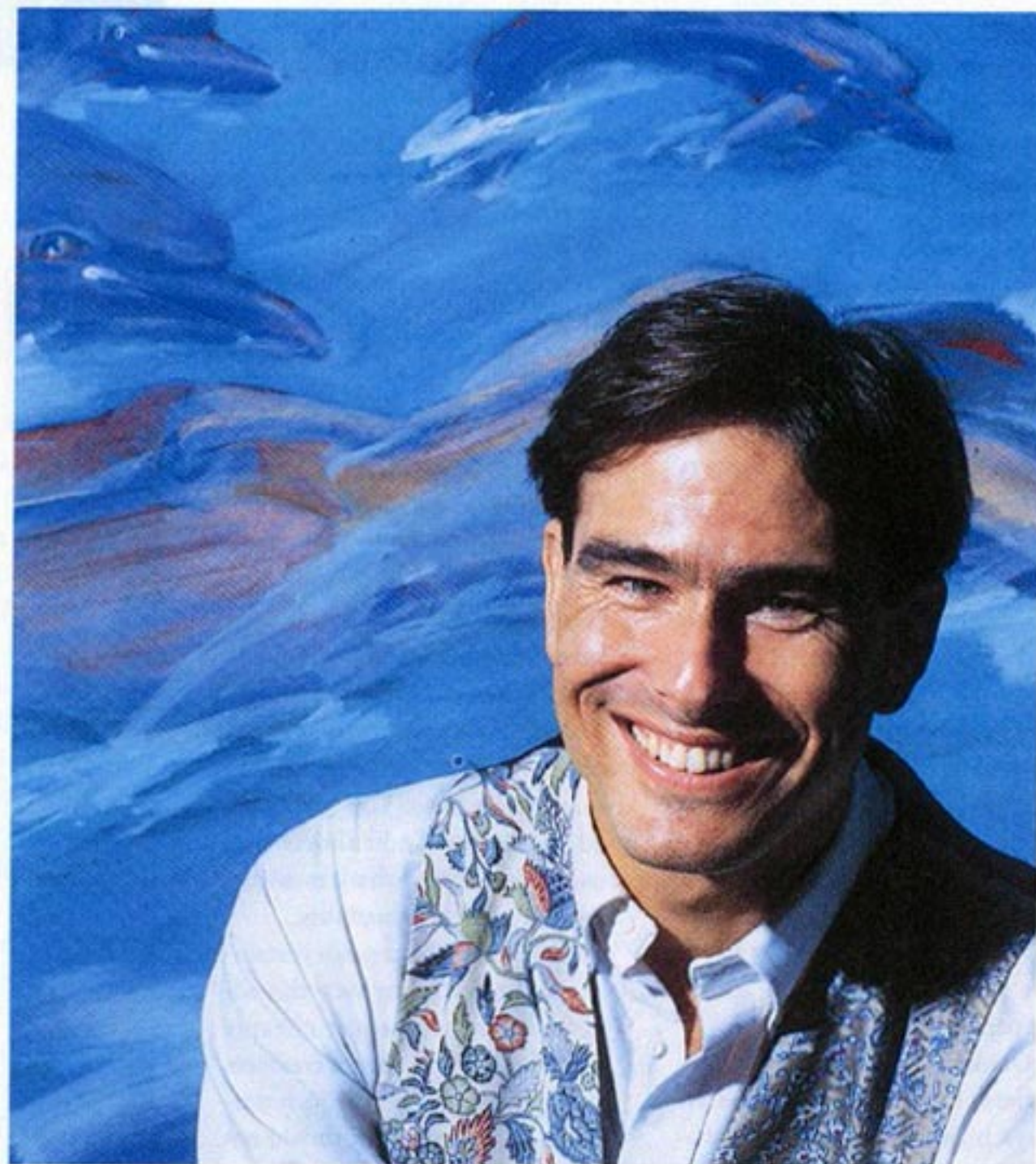
After winning a silver and bronze, he posed with his medals and a chicken leg outside a KFC franchise and sent them the snaps. At the time he was an associate producer for Star's Prime Sports. But KFC told Burns to "stick around" and a job offer soon followed.

"Yes," he says, "the position was created specifically for me, but not out of pity. There are no free lunches in Asia if you're handicapped — I never felt so handicapped in my life as when I first arrived in Hong Kong. It was a cold slap in the face, kind of a wake-up call after [being pampered in] the US."

"But KFC is a very real company — it's not a charity — and it was far-sighted enough to see it would need someone to coordinate communications," he says. "I like to think it was my communications skills and outward confidence which got me the job. Besides, companies need people who are different."

It's the will to move mountains — or at least climb them — that spurs Burns on. He's scaled Jade Mountain in Taiwan and Mount Kinabalu in East Malaysia (South-east Asia's tallest)— a feat not even members of the Hong Kong Regiment could muster earlier this year.

The son of a diplomat, he has traveled extensively throughout Europe and hiked through China, Tibet and Nepal. An interest in Asian art led him to Taiwan in 1984, where he lived for nearly five years, studying Chinese painting, calligraphy and seal-carving, as well as Mandarin. Burns came to Hong Kong in 1991 via a trip to Tahiti on a boat named *Return Of The Marco Polo*, help-



Burns — will to move mountains

ing to produce documentaries on third-world countries for a European television network.

As for combining art — which takes up half of his spare time — with injecting public relations ideas into his day job, Burns says he likes the contrast between "corporate KFC and using the right side of the brain to paint."

"Perhaps my lack of corporate understanding is my biggest asset," he says. "It

enables me to look at things from a different perspective. Hopefully, in the future, my creativity will come to the forefront and I will be utilized more."

So is there anything he feels his disability has stopped him from doing? He reflects for a few moments and says: "Yes. I'd like to be able to ride a bicycle. I think that would be really fun."

—CORTLAN BENNE