

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 2-8, 2015

A GUIDE TO THE GREATER FORT MYERS ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

"I call my paintings the world's shortest short stories ... I've always been attracted to words, to letter forms. We're surrounded by letter forms. They're a big part of our environment."

— Wayne White, artist



Wayne White at work.

COURTESY PHOTO

Wayne's world

Artist Wayne White brings his off-kilter view of the world to Bob Rauschenberg Gallery

BY NANCY STETSON
nstetson@floridaweekly.com

The three-dimensional letters hover over the mundane landscape like alien spaceships from another galaxy or sprawl out like credits announcing the title of a film.

Sometimes they form words, but more often entire phrases — "All That Fake Laughin For Nothin," "You're Just Agreeing With Me So I'll Shut Up," "Hoozy Thinky Iz" and "Sexy Paintings

By Sexy Painters For Sexy People," for example.

They're Wayne White's word paintings, playful phrases painted on top of cheap, thrift-store lithographs (those nondescript, mass-produced reproductions you often see hanging on motel walls).

>>inside:
An interview with
writer/cartoonist
Mimi Pond.
C10

SEE ARTIST, C4 ▶

WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 2-8, 2015

www.FloridaWeekly.com

Vol. IX, No. 21 • FREE

FORT MYERS
FLORIDA WEEKLY
IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

INSIDE



Wayne's world

Whimsical art at the Rauschenberg Gallery. C1 ▶

ARTIST

From page 1

Mr. White takes these forgettable landscapes and transforms them into something engaging and witty.

"I call my paintings the world's shortest short stories," he says. "I've always been attracted to words, to letter forms. We're surrounded by letter forms. They're a big part of our environment."

As a child growing up in Chattanooga, Tenn., even before he learned to read, the shapes of letters and words fascinated Mr. White. "I saw each letter as a character or a piece of architecture," he says. "Just the shapes alone interested me. I used to draw them as characters, (such as) Mr. S."

His word paintings are in the tradition of concrete poetry, he explains, where words are placed on the page in specific ways to make a visual effect.

In some, the letters look as if they've dropped acid, stretching, curling and elongating in bright, carnival-like colors.

The humor, playfulness and spirit of absurdity in his work come as no surprise when you realize that this is the man who won three Emmys for his work on the TV show "Pee-wee's Playhouse," for which he designed the set and created puppets including Floory, Dirty Dog, Cool Cat and Randy.

After "Pee-wee's Playhouse" ended, he went on to design sets and characters for 1990s television shows such as "Shining Time Station," "Beakman's World," "Riders in the Sky" and "Bill & Willis."

He's also won Billboard and MTV Music Video awards for his work as an art director on music videos such as The Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight" and Peter Dinklage's "Big Time."

An exhibit of Mr. White's work, "Wayne WHITE: Here Comes Mr. Know-It-All," will be on display Sept. 11-Nov. 7 at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the campus of Florida South-Western State College in Fort Myers. The artist will attend and give a performance at the opening reception from 6-8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 11.

Many artistic hats

In the art world, Mr. White has worn a variety of hats, working as a painter, sculptor, cartoonist, puppeteer, set designer, art director, animator, illustrator and sign painter. Very early in his career, he took a class from cartoonist Art Spiegelman, who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel "Maus" and also co-edited "Raw" magazine, which Mr. White calls "the world's first Abstract Expressionist comic book." He worked as Mr. Spiegelman's studio assistant for a while, and also for multimedia artist Red Grooms, who he says was essential to his development as an artist.

"To actually meet him and work with him was a huge, amazing dream," he says of Mr. Grooms. "It gave me so much confidence. It really gave me courage to go forward in the art world ... I'm modeling myself after him in many ways."

Mr. White had created puppets and put on shows with them in college and afterward, in New York. The edgy, anything-goes puppet shows with a punk mentality helped him get the job for "Mrs. Cabobble's Caboose," a children's music show on a PBS affiliate in Nashville, which led to his helping create the set and puppets for "Pee-wee's Playhouse."

He burned out after working in Hollywood, however, and 15 years ago returned to painting.

He originally purchased thrift-store paintings for their frames, but one day, as he was about to kick in the painting,



COURTESY PHOTO

Wayne White (above) will display his work (below) at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery.

he thought: What if I paint my words on top of this already-painted landscape?

The resulting painting, "Human F**ckin Knowledge," was a big hit with anyone who visited his studio and led him to do more work on thrift-store landscape reproductions. When he showed them at a local Los Angeles restaurant, patrons purchased them so rapidly he could barely keep up.

Then, he suddenly had gallery representation.

In 2009, designer Todd Oldham edited a 382-page monograph of Mr. White's work titled "Maybe Now I'll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve."

And in 2012, Neil Berkeley directed a documentary about him called "Beauty is Embarrassing." The film premiered at SXSW in Austin, Texas.

Esquire magazine dubbed Mr. White "one of the most exciting artists in America," and The Oxford American called him "the weirdest landscape painter in America."

"It was just an experiment, a one-shot kind of thing, no pre-planning," the artist says of his decision to use the thrift-store painting as his canvas. "That's a lesson I always impart when I talk to art students: Always be ready to try a one-shot experiment, to do something goofy, even if you don't think it'll work or it's kind of stupid. Try it anyway. That's what the studio is for, chasing down things. (You'll get) mostly failures, but every so often something happens."

His 15 years of creating word paintings "all started with a goofy experiment," he adds. "It wouldn't have worked if I had thought about it seriously and planned it months in advance."

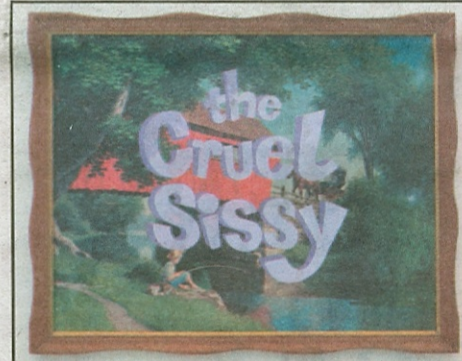
"The best stuff comes out of you sometimes (when you don't plan it.) That's the value of humor: It's all about spontaneity and surprise. You catch somebody off-guard. There's no better feeling than that. It's great to be jerked out of this mundane routine. It solicits this sound from you, like an animal. It's one of the greatest feelings in the world, but it's discounted as minor."

Find the humor

Mr. White believes humor is sacred and feels his mission is to bring humor to fine art.

"I don't know why you have to put on your Sunday best to make art," he says. "It doesn't have to be a solemn trip to the chapel. It seems pretentious to me. It's like going to church. Why is everybody acting all weird and weepy and all dressed up? What does this have to do with the way you really are? I bring the crazy, vulgar, weird, irritating things of life to art."

Humor is the spark of life, he adds. "Without it, we're dead. We have to



have humor to survive. It keeps us sane. I don't want to go to church when I make art; I want to be myself, with no shoes, cracking jokes and being myself."

He acknowledges the influence of Ed Ruscha, who incorporates words into his paintings, calling him "probably the greatest word artist, word painter. I'm a huge fan of his," he says. "I'm carrying on Ruscha's tradition. But I'm bringing my own thing to it."

He points out that other collage artists besides Robert Rauschenberg used junk and scraps to create art.

"Everybody's carrying on what went before and putting their own spin on it."

Like Mr. Rauschenberg, Mr. White likes to use found material. He'll create puppets and sculpture out of twigs and wood scraps. "I'm attracted to discovering materials and using them, rather than just traditional art supplies," he says.

He also allows that his work is very different than Mr. Rauschenberg's. "I'm a storyteller and a puppeteer, and his work was a little more abstract than mine," he says. "But I do appreciate his humor. We're both Southerners. A lot of shared traits there. I've always been a huge fan. He was the first abstract artist I really 'got.' He was my gateway into modern art. I loved his use of material and his humor. (It's all about) spontaneity, reacting to things, collaborating with your materials, just letting things kind of happen, serendipity."

A Rauschenberg likeness

In early 2013, Mr. White and his wife, the cartoonist/writer Mimi Pond (see page C10), had a month-long Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Residency at the late artist's compound on Captiva Island, which Mr. White describes as "one of the ultimate artist residencies available in the country."

"They give you your own studio, art supplies, a chef that cooks for you every day."

He created approximately 40 watercolors while there, "just reacting to the environment."

He visited the Edison & Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers and also took a trip to the junkyard where Mr. Rauschenberg would get his scrap metal.

"It was a real honor to be there," he says. "And it's an honor ... to be showing at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. He was an amazing artist and philanthropist."

In addition to showing Mr. White's work, the gallery has commissioned him to create a Robert Rauschenberg puppet. Mr. White will be in residency a week prior to the Sept. 11 opening, working with FSW students to create an oversized Rauschenberg-like character.

At the opening reception, he'll don the "giant mask costume" and give a short performance. "I haven't quite worked out what I'm doing," he says, "but he'll be performing in his studio, making art. It relates back to his use of cardboard, kind of quoting that in a way."

No denying

Being an artist is never an easy road, but Mr. White says, "The only thing that really matters is persistence. That's the one talent you've got to have, or it's all over."

He recalls watching actor/comedian/musician Steve Martin being interviewed by Charlie Rose.

"He said, 'Kids are always asking me, how do I get into show business, how do I get an agent, how do I get signed? I always tell them something they don't want to hear: Do something great.'"

To that, Mr. White adds: "Do something where you cannot be denied. That's all there is to it."

"You do something great through persistence. It's not about going to parties or who you meet. It's those long, lonely hours doing something repetitively. That's all there is to it. Everything else is politics. You've got to do something where you are not denied." ■

in the know

'Wayne WHITE: Here Comes Mr. Know-It-All'

>> **What:** An exhibit of paintings, drawings and more by Wayne White

>> **Where:** The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, Fort Myers campus

>> **When:** Sept. 11-Nov. 7, with opening reception from 6-8 p.m. Sept. 11 and regular hours 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday.

>> **Admission:** Free

>> **Info:** 489-9313 or rauschenberggallery.com