

James Franco, Kalup Linzy explore soaps, celebrity in Fort Myers show

Charles Runnells, The News-Press

Published 10:45 a.m. ET April 19, 2017 | Updated 5:14 p.m. ET April 19, 2017



(Photo: Charles Runnells/News-Press)

Actor James Franco didn't make it to the opening of Bob Rauschenberg Gallery's latest exhibit, but his artwork certainly did.

And so did his famous Hollywood face — thanks to photos, videos, magazine covers and the funny, satirical soap operas he's created with New York artist Kalup Linzy.

Franco and Linzy are the subject of a first-of-its-kind exhibit at the Florida SouthWestern State College gallery. They've both shown their work separately, says gallery director Jade Dellinger, but never together in a gallery or art museum.

The kindred spirits met in 2009 at Art Basel Miami Beach, where Linzy was performing. And they soon found themselves collaborating on experimental videos, paintings, photography, live performances and other art projects — often playing characters in drag.

"We're on both extremes," Linzy says. "We're complete opposites, in a lot of ways. But there are a lot of things that connect us. He's a classic Hollywood actor, I feel, and I grew up watching a lot of those things."

Their playful, tongue-in-cheek videos and other artwork poke fun at gender, race, family relationships and the world of Hollywood, soap operas and celebrity.

To underline the Hollywood connection, the "James Franco & Kalup Linzy: Collaborations" exhibit features a screening room built into a corner of the gallery from raw wooden beams and flats. "We wanted it to look like the back of a movie set," Dellinger says.

Audiences can sit on risers and watch 10 short episodes of "Ozara and Katessa" on a large silver screen. In that fake soap opera series, Linzy plays the character Katessa Braswell, and Franco plays both Katessa's best friend, Ozara, and her boyfriend.



Hollywood actor James Franco and New York artist Kalup Linzy often dress in drag for their collaborative art videos and other projects. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Each 10-minute episode features the actors dressed in drag and speaking in higher-pitched voices as they rehearse scenes for a soap opera and do other things. One episode, "Sweat in da Wind," parodies "Gone with the Wind." Another episode, "A Star Is Reborn," has Katessa giving birth to a shiny gold star.

"OK," Franco tells Linzy. "You're still not hitting the mark. Now imagine you're giving birth to the camera. PUSH!"

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Soap operas have always been a part of Linzy's life, and they ended up being a huge influence on his artwork, too. He would watch soap operas with his grandmother, for example, and his dad was a "Guiding Light" fan.

"It was just something that was passed down through the family," says Linzy, a Florida native born in Clermont and raised in Stuckey. "I sort of dreamed of being in a soap opera, and never thought I would be. So I started making my own soap operas."

His soap-opera dream came true in 2010, though, when Franco pulled some strings and got Linzy a short acting gig with him on "General Hospital" (where Franco played the deranged artist "Franco," something the actor has described as less about acting and more about performance art). The FSW exhibit features video of that appearance and a separate, behind-the-scenes art video shot on the "General Hospital" set.

Linzy still can't believe he got to be on that beloved TV soap.

"The producers said yes, and I was shocked," Linzy recalls. "I was jumping up and down, I was so excited."



An audience watches James Franco and Kalup Linzy in a scene from "Ozara and Katessa." (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Franco wasn't available for a News-Press interview. But in statement submitted through the gallery, he called Linzy a versatile performer and artist who uses many voices, personas and media in his work. "Underneath all these different faces and forms, there is a common and sincere longing for love, identity and artistic purity," he said.

Franco didn't actually meet Linzy until Art Basel Miami. But before that, he saw Linzy speaking to graduate students at Columbia University.

"The day Kalup spoke, I had an epiphany," Franco said. "I knew that he was going where I wanted to go."

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Most people know Franco as the actor from Hollywood hits such as "127 Hours," "Pineapple Express" and "Spider-Man." But the actor has always been a visual artist, Linzy says. When he became a name-brand actor, however, those impulses got pushed aside somewhat.

"He just had these interests he felt like he wasn't able to explore," Linzy says. "His acting career took off, and the art became a hobby."

Linzy isn't nearly as famous, but he's well-regarded in the art world. The University of South Florida graduate's work has been collected in The Museum of Modern Art/New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Whitney Museum of American Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"He's world-renowned," Dellinger says. "He's quite the art star."

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Franco says he was impressed with Linzy's work from the start.

"Having now worked with Kalup, I have gained a deeper understanding of the inspiration of his work," he said in his statement. "In my point of view, Kalup's work is a post-racial attempt to incorporate himself into the adult world/soap-opera world that he witnessed as a child.

"Behind the videos, I can feel Kalup's younger self trying to make sense of the world around him and trying to fit in. As a young, black, gay man, it probably seemed like the easiest way to fit in was to become one (or many) of the characters that the adults watched on television."



One of Kalup Linzy's pieces, "The Queen Rose Family Tree," stretches across two walls at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery and shows photos of the 83 characters in Katessa Brasswell's family tree. Most of those characters (including Katessa) are played by Linzy, but many are also played by his sister, his cousins, nieces, nephews and other people (including REM singer Michael Stipe). (Photo: Charles Runnells/The News-Press)

The Fort Myers exhibit opened April 7 and continues through June 3. Franco hasn't made an appearance at the exhibit yet, but Dellinger says he's still hoping to get him to visit sometime before the show closes.

Other exhibit highlights include Franco's "New Film Stills" series, where he recreates the movie-inspired photos of Cindy Sherman by often dressing in drag; and props from "General Hospital" and "Ozara and Katessa," including wigs, makeup, scripts and clothes.

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tree — mostly played by Linzy, but also played by his sister, his cousins, nieces, nephews and other people (including REM singer Michael Stipe).

"This is essentially a sort of *dramatis personae*," Dellinger says about the family tree. "It's his cast of characters. It's the fiction he's created."

Linzy says the soap-opera series and other soap-inspired art projects aren't necessarily about sexuality, despite the fact that he and Franco are dressing in drag.

"It's more about gender than sexuality," Linzy says. "And family relationships, and the things that bring us together, and the things that separate us, that make us feel different."

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If you go

What: James Franco and Kalup Linzy art exhibit

When: Now through June 3

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway S.W., Building L, south Fort Myers.

Admission: Free

Gallery hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Info: 489-9313 or rauschenberggallery.com (<http://rauschenberggallery.com/>)

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