

'Pee-Wee's Playhouse,' Smashing Pumpkins artist at FSW



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(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **What:** "Wayne White: Here Comes Mr. Know-It-All" exhibit
- **When Opens** Friday and continues through Nov. 7. Reception is 6-8 p.m. Friday
- **Where:** Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway, south Fort Myers

[Pee-Wee Herman](#) was the best boss ever, says artist Wayne White. And 25 years later, "Pee-Wee's Playhouse" is still probably the coolest job he's ever had.

"That was the greatest," White says. "It was like an art project that got on national television."

The Saturday morning TV show — which starred comedian [Paul Reubens](#) as man-child Pee-Wee Herman and featured set design, puppets and voice work by White — was supposedly pitched to kids. But it was adults who responded most to the show's edginess, surrealism and creativity.

"We were always doing it for ourselves, as adults," White says.

Now he's a respected fine artist known for his distinctive word paintings: He finds neglected thrift-shop landscape paintings and re-purposes them by painting humorous, stylized phrases over the original image.

The Emmy Award-winning Los Angeles artist has come a long way since that late '80s TV show. White went on to make TV commercials, expand his puppetry career and create groundbreaking music videos for [Peter Gabriel](#) ("Big Time") and [The Smashing Pumpkins](#) ("Tonight, Tonight").

An exhibit of White's paintings opens Friday at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery and continues through Nov. 7. At Friday's reception, White will perform a puppet show in honor of late local art legend and gallery namesake [Robert Rauschenberg](#).

"It's going to be a large costumed puppet of Rauschenberg in his studio," White says. "That's all I'm going to say."

White, 57, admits that he probably wouldn't even have an art career if it wasn't for Reubens and "Pee-Wee's Playhouse."

"That was my big break as an artist," he says. "That show changed my life for forever. It's why I'm talking to you right now."

Before that, he says, he was struggling to make a living as a cartoonist and doing "goofy, punk-rock puppet shows" for his friends as a hobby. Then "Playhouse" put him in front of a national audience.

White did set design and created puppets on all four seasons of "Pee-Wee's Playhouse" and also the 1988 movie "Big Top Pee-Wee." He also performed the voices of Vance the Talking Pig, Dirty Dog, Floory, Cool Cat, Chicky Baby and the red-headed bully Randy.

"Randy was the most popular character I did," White says. "People loved the naughtiness and the bad-boy marionette thing."

Since then, White has worked on music videos, created puppets and puppet parades and — for the last 15 years — made word paintings. His fine-art career got a major boost in 2012 when he became the subject of the documentary movie “Beauty is Embarrassing” (the title of one of White’s word paintings).

“It definitely gave me a bigger audience,” he says.

White’s paintings began as an experiment. He’d started to add surrealistic elements to landscapes, and then he decided to paint in humorous, stylized phrases such as “Cheap Bastard” and “Smoking Weed in a Porta Potty at the Civil War Reenactment.”



Artist Wayne White takes old thrift-shop paintings and adds humorous words on top. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

He always starts with reproductions of landscape paintings that he finds in thrift shops and garage sales. He never paints on originals, though. He says he’s using the paintings as a blank canvas, and he’s not trying to make a statement about the artist and the painting, itself.

His idea is to resuscitate those old, anonymous paintings and give them a new purpose. The images in the paintings have absolutely nothing to do with the words, he says.

“I just use it as an empty stage,” he says. “At that point in their lives, the paintings are empty. They’ve been cast aside.”

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Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway, south Fort Myers

Admission: Free

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

Info: 489-9313 or [RauschenbergGallery.com](#)