

‘Artist’s Artist’ exhibition compels out presence, not once, but multiple times

By TOM HALL
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On view now through August 8 at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College is *Theo Wujcik – Artist’s Artist*. The exhibition is comprised of a number of works from Wujcik’s Blue Chip series, as well as a mix of other works which highlight his relationship with the gallery’s namesake.

There are many reasons to visit this exhibition, multiple times. Wujcik is an important artist, with work in the permanent collections of the Whitney, MOMA, The National Gallery, The

Boston Museum of Art, The Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art, and many other impressive venues. With his passing a little more than a year ago, *Artist’s Artist* is likely to represent the last time a solo exhibition of his work will be staged anywhere in Southwest Florida. And with Blue Chip, Theo’s work came full circle. He started his career with portraiture and detailed drawing, moved to abstract and pop, and returned to portraiture at the end, incorporating eloquent abstract and pop elements in his inimitable style. But the most compelling reason for seeing this show is that Wujcik’s Blue Chip paintings express the artist’s final thoughts about art and the world he inhabited for more than four decades.

Wujcik created Blue Chip for an exhibition that opened at Dallas’ Galleri Urbane on February 22, 2014. *Balloon Dog, Splash, World Harmony, Monarch, Tamarind, Times Square, Cross Cultural Ave* and *Blinded by Bacon* were all completed in 2014. *Mirror Image* the year before. Sure, artists everywhere are





known to cloister themselves in their studios for months on end in order to get ready for a big show. But what's truly remarkable here is that each of these paintings were conceived, crafted and completed after Theo received the devastating diagnosis that cancer had metastasized to multiple organs.

A gamer to the end, Theo embarked upon an aggressive regimen of chemotherapy. But Theo was a realist and undoubtedly knew in the recesses of his mind that the odds were against him and his remaining time short. No one would have faulted Theo had he cancelled the show. Getting ready for any solo show requires a gargantuan effort and exacts a tremendous

physical and mental toll on even the hale and heartiest artists. All the more so in Theo's case. Not only did Theo work in large scale (most of the Blue Chip paintings are 78 x 90 inches or bigger), he made his own stretchers, stretched his own canvas and applied his own gesso to the supports. But there was no quit in Theo Wujcik, who had a daunting reputation as a grinder. Before the cancer, Theo routinely started work in the afternoon, painted through the evening and into the wee hours of the morning, sometimes taking a break at midnight to dance and mingle with the crowds that flocked to the multilevel dance club called the Castle that is located directly across the street from his Ybor City studio before returning to his studio.



With his energy flagging, though not his will or spirit, Theo brought in Tampa realist Peg



Trezevant to help him complete the last three paintings in the series. Other iconic artists had long used studio assistants to churn out work. Warhol, for instance, had an entire factory. Closer to home, Bob Rauschenberg housed a host of assistants at his Captiva compound that included the likes of Darryl Pottorf, Lawrence Voytek and Jonas Stirner. "But Theo painted every inch of every canvas himself," notes Trezevant, who studied painting with Theo at the University of South Florida back in 1994. "He had done it this way for decades. For Theo, painting was

living.”

Toward the end, Wujcik was forced to work from a wheelchair, scooting up to a painting and pointing out sections with his cane for Trezevant to do. “He liked the brush marks in a particular passage or, without mincing words, would state that something needed fixing,” says Trezevant of their brief collaboration. “Occasionally he would rise from the chair and start painting or taping alongside me.” Adds ex-wife Susan Johnson, who cared for Theo during his final days and serves now as custodian of his work, “He even used a stick with a piece of charcoal taped to the end to sketch Rusha’s image on the painting he did of him.”



It might be a stretch to say that Theo was driven in the end to complete the Blue Chip works as an exclamation point or crowning achievement in his overall body of work. But he no doubt was cognizant that the series was likely to be his last. And so one has to ask what was it that this artist so wanted the world to know that would justify this Spartan drive and determination in the face of his failing health.

Theo's gallery sheds some light on this. “Blue Chip is intelligently crafted and a more than a little tongue-in-cheek,” said Galleri Urbane in the lead up to the exhibition's opening. “He's arranged a group of paintings depicting his peers, inclu

ding artists who can be counted among his closest friends, James Rosenquist and Jeff Koons.” Over the course of his life, Theo worked with a legion of internationally-known artists including Rosenquist, Koons, Ruscha, and Robert Morris, Richard Anuszkiewicz and Nicholas Krushenick. And on a superficial level, the Blue Chip paintings explore Theo's personal and professional reflections on these and some of the top artists of the past six decades, including Rosenquist, Koons, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Hirst and Zhang Huan.



But probing deeper, each painting provides a portal into the depicted artist's own oeuvre of work. Take, for example, the work titled *Splash*. "I find all kinds of things on the street," said Theo of this painting. "When I found the picture of Murikami it had something spilled on it. The Xerox was bleeding green — so I called it 'Splash.'" And like Rauschenberg and his progeny who now used found objects to make upcycled, recycled and repurposed mixed media and multi-disciplined pieces, therein lies the key to appreciating Theo's genius. You or I would have stepped over that marred picture of Murikami. Wujcik incorporated it into a work of art that pays homage to the artist.

In *Mirror Image*, Theo depicts Koons handling a flashlight and "reverberating in a doppelgangerish mirror image," says Galleri Urbane. "Thus, homage is given to Koon's body of work while simultaneously delivering a mischievous wink. Blue Chip delivers a



studied understanding of each artist's work while exposing a process that is thoroughly identifiable with Mr. Wujcik."

Unlike Peg Trezevant, Susan Johnson or even Theo's daughter, Frankie, we don't have the benefit of conversations with Theo or the copious notes he recorded in studio about each work. Thus, it's totally conjecture what Theo intended with and by each Blue Chip work. That's not the point. In fact, even if we did know exactly what he had in mind, that's beside the point. It is sufficient to know that Theo expended every last measure of his life

force remaining days — precious time he could have spent with family or reveling in all that he'd done and become — to complete these profound paintings paying tribute to the artists he knew and who touched him both personally and professionally. And it's that realization that compels our presence before each of the works now on view inside the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery.

It is for us, the viewers, to derive our own understanding from the trove that Theo bequeathed to us as his dying utterances. It is for us to assign meaning to his playfully cryptic encapsulations of each subject's contribution to the state of the art world today — and going forward. Because that's where Theo Wujcik lived. And that's where Theo Wujcik yet endures today.

And that's why to all who knew him, Theo Wujcik was held in high regard as a person, as a friend, and as an Artist's Artist. Theo Wujcik — Artist's Artist remains on view now through August 8, 2015. ■