

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

## Wayne White brings his wild imagination to Houston

By ANDREW DANSBY Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle  
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Brett Coomer : Chronicle

Artist Wayne White is currently working on a sculpture at Rice Gallery called Big Llectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep, which was inspired by country star George Jones.

growing voice. He also shares Dirty Dog's eyes, lively blue but lined and sleepy. These days, the 52-year-old also looks a bit like Cool Cat, his face surrounded by black plastic-frame glasses, an admirable crop of hair and a bushy beard he grew at the request of Steven Berkman, a well-known photographer friend who wants to shoot White looking like somebody from the late 1800s.

More recently, White has been creating instantly recognizable landscapes. He buys mass-produced framed mid-century landscapes from thrift stores and paints big, often humorous, block-letter words or phrases — many from his youth in Tennessee — on top, often in pastels.

Despite the disparate media, White's work has a continuity. It's a fidgety fusion of Americana and avant garde, bracingly visual yet language-obsessed. It can take something blandly comforting like a landscape by Lorenz Griffith or Paul Detlefsen and make it jarring with a phrase such as "Drop the Country Boy Act" or "I'm Lost on a Spaceship, Mama," letters that so greatly contrast the context that they seem like UFOs landing on a covered

Wayne White arrived in Houston and dreamed about George Jones dreaming. The artist, a Tennessean by birth and Los Angeleno by residence, had been invited to create any work he pleased in the Rice Gallery, a space devoted to site-specific installation art. Between the locale and the heat, his mind was drawn to Jones' song Ragged but Right, with its lyric, "a big electric fan to keep me cool while I sleep."

"Instead of reflection and meditation, I kept hearing that song," White says, "so I thought, 'Why fight it?'"

White describes his plan to me the day before he starts work. It is going to be a large George Jones head — "with the flat top," he quickly adds — on its side. Inside Jones' forehead will be a peep show with puppets. His mouth will open by means of a rope and pulley, and his eyes will roll from awake to asleep. A fan will be at the base of his neck, true to the lyric. "He'll be asleep," White says, "but it's a fitful sleep. It's a sleep of reason. Though I guess that can produce monsters. Then there's a circle-of-life thing with the fan."

White smiles. "All that's my deep art part."

*Big Llectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep* is a large undertaking even by White's standards. It threads together various elements of his varied and storied career.

Even those who don't know about White have likely stumbled across his work. White was the visionary behind Peter Gabriel's *Big Time* and Smashing Pumpkins' *Tonight Tonight* videos, two memorable pieces in a genre prone to forgettable lip-synced pastiche. He was also a puppet and set designer, puppeteer, and voice for *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. Talking about the show, he'll sometimes drop into character, serving up Dirty Dog's

bridge. If these pieces carry the weight of punch lines, that's intentional. White's dry sense of humor is usually present, it just doesn't come with a laugh track.

These recent paintings have earned White significant attention. He says one of the first breaks for what he calls his "word paintings" came in 2000 when one graced the cover of *Nixon*, an album by Lambchop, a soulful chamber country ensemble from Nashville. White had met Lambchop's Kurt Wagner in the mid-1980s, and they remain friends. Wagner had used a White painting for an album cover before and decided he wanted a word painting for his next project. He asked White which slogans he'd used lately.

"When he got round to *Nixon*, I knew immediately that it was the one," Wagner says. "Our record was full of references and influences that came from the great soul music from that period of time during Nixon's administration and that plus a connection to Wayne seemed like enough to me."

Wagner also used White's word paintings on subsequent albums.

He describes "Wayne's inner universe" as being "as true to the core of what it takes to be an artist as I've seen."

White was born in Chattanooga, Tenn., but grew up in a woodsy setting in Hixon. His father was a former athlete and a mechanical type, which might explain a lot about White. An affinity for the math and craft of carpentry is apparent in the construction of Jones' head. But a rebellious kid might choose art over sport.

White attended Middle Tennessee State University and moved to New York, primarily to meet graphic novelist Art Spiegelman (*Maus*), whom he tracked down at the School of Visual Arts.

In New York, White was able to study Spiegelman's work and also found a culture of like-minded artists, including his future wife, Mimi Pond, a highly-regarded writer and cartoonist whose myriad credits include the script for the first episode of *The Simpsons*. A puppet show White did called *Jerry Lee/Jimmy Lee*, about Jerry Lee Lewis and Jimmy Swaggart, helped him land the job on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. He points out that Pee Wee Herman creator and actor Paul Reubens was already a big-screen star by the time he got his own TV show. That Reubens was able to recruit a bunch of New York artists to bring his show to life, rather than doing it on a Los Angeles sound stage, which offered a rare creative freedom.

White and Pond now live in Los Angeles with their two children, but he's attained sufficient renown to avoid work he doesn't want to do.

"I've always been lucky enough to meet people with some power who let me do what I want to do," he says, mentioning Reubens. "He'd set us loose in a room, no rules." White calls Peter Gabriel "a great boss."

"An artist needs those kinds of connections to survive," he adds. "And you don't meet guys like that in Hixon."

White grew up not far from the country-music hub of Nashville, but says he developed a greater appreciation for Jones' music through a friend he met in New York.

In addition to his local ties, Saratoga-born Jones was a natural choice for an installation, White points out, because his mug has strong features: the curved nose and tight eyes that earned the singer the nickname the Possum. White has drawn Jones before, but the scale has changed.

"I'm reaching back," he says. "It's good to get back to the puppet thing. I like putting on a show. I'm an entertainer. I like being the carnival barker."

White's Jones head will be unveiled on Sept. 10. It will remain on display until Oct. 18, at which point it will be dismantled and not rebuilt, which is the fate that meets all projects at Rice Gallery.

White shrugs. "I don't get attached," he says. "I really prefer to move on. I don't like to covet stuff I make."

Renowned artist, designer and fashion icon Todd Oldham, a fan of White, recently assembled three-plus decades of White's work — word paintings, photos of puppets and sculptures, sketches, doodles, and more — and published them in a lavish book titled *Wayne White: Maybe Now I'll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve*, which has earned coverage in such magazines as *Esquire* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

## RESOURCES

### **BIG LECTRIC FAN TO KEEP ME COOL WHILE I SLEEP**

- **When:** Sept. 10-Oct. 18
- **Hours:** • 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Friday-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursdays; and noon-5 p.m. Sundays
- **Where:** Rice Gallery, ground floor of Sewell Hall, Rice University
- **Where:** Rice Gallery, ground floor of Sewell Hall, Rice University
- **Admission:** Free

### **GALLERY TALK BY WAYNE WHITE**

- **When:** Noon Sept. 11
- **Where:** Rice Gallery

### **BOOK SIGNING**

White will speak and sign copies of *Maybe Now I'll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve*

- **When:** 7 p.m. Tuesday
- **Where:** Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 for information or to pre-order books

When *Lectric's* George is complete, it seems like it will have a similar feel as White's paintings, the whole UFO-perched-by-a-babbling-brook effect of taking what is known and making it different. Weird is a word that gets used a lot with White's work, but it's a little cheap. The art is panoramic, familiar but strange, funny and a little sad. Were there a word for it, that word might end up painted in big block letters on a landscape wrapped around a tree or creeping around the back of a barn.

[andrew.dansby@chron.com](mailto:andrew.dansby@chron.com)

White doesn't mind the retrospective, even though it looks back. "It's different," he says. "It feels like a big thumbs up."

And he goes back to rigorous rhinoplasty, using a horse hair brush to carve out two nasolabial folds and a philtrum from particularly dense pieces of Styrofoam. The floor of the Rice Gallery room is dusted with snow from the shavings.

Jones will be surrounded by the "lectric fan" lyric written in two-story block letters painted on the room's three solid walls and on the floor.

Prior to construction, White's description of the installation over beers revealed a disparity between our respective imaginations. In person, Jones' head exceeded what I thought possible, a 15-foot-high totem of wood and foam and adhesives, all scraped, hammered, glued and thrown together in a colossal monument to a musician White admires. "This *will* be the biggest George Jones head ever made," he says, smiling.

White says he has "a vague day-by-day plan, but there's always desperate hours toward the end."

Right now he's in work mode. The face is far from constructed. Plastering and painting remains to be done, as does painting the towering block letters on the walls. The peep show, the ice house, it all seems insurmountable. Like his word paintings, the construction flits between comfort and anxiety, touched with a childlike sense of wonder and enthusiasm.