Fancy Talk

The Art of Wayne White

By Patrick Strange

For Southerners, language has long existed as more than just a mere conveyance of meaning; it lives as a storehouse for shared memory, as melody, as utterance often enjoyed purely for its own sake. Beginning with Mark Twain, the Southern tradition of using everyday language to reach what some may call a "higher" philosophy is a strong and vibrant one—and one that often ends with wildly humorous results.

Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and bred in a town just north of there called Hixson, Wayne Wilkes White is no different in that he, too, employs the speech of his aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors, wife and children to breach the imposing walls of high art. Long interested in typography, the now-established painter began his career as an amateur comic book artist—Xeroxing, stapling and distributing his own books with titles like *Geedar*, *Shorty* and *Saw Baby*, and even traveling all the way to New York City for the chance to meet storied comics artist Art Spiegelman (a task in which he succeeded). While in New York, White got the opportunity to work for a number of publications (*Raw*, *The New York Times*) and became a sign painter during the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. From there, his career took off: first as set and puppet designer for a then little-known TV show called *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, and following, as art director for such seminal musical videos as Peter Gabriel's "Big Time" and The Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight."

These days, White is once again making textual signs, but those of a slightly different nature than announcing downhill skiing events. Taking lithographs of American landscape paintings he finds at yard sales and thrift stores, White integrates lustrous 3-D wordings—oftentimes Southern idioms or crass colloquial phrases like "Buttered Up and Dumbed Down," "Sugar Tit," and "Fanfuckintastic"—within the work's field of depth. What he terms as "word paintings," the final creations cause an array of elating yet competing emotional responses from the viewer, ranging from ▶▶

Doin' Moviestars and Paintin' Masterpieces, 2006

Local Whores Who Paint, 2006

Wayne White in his Los Angeles studio

nostalgia to contemplativeness to unadulterated joviality. At once cheap and profoundly meaningful, White's paintings somehow remind us of our own absurd frailty—but always sweetened with his special brand of country humor running throughout.

On the occasion of his new book, *Wayne White: Maybe Now I'll Get The Respect I So Richly Deserve*, a 384-page full-color anthology published by AMMO Books and edited and designed by art guru Todd Oldham, White met with *Filter* at his Los Angeles home, which he shares with his wife, writer and cartoonist Mimi Pond, and their two children. With unfinished paintings and sculptures looming overhead, White spoke candidly about words, colors, punchlines, and the tyranny of coaches.

Regarding the scope of projects contained in the book—from your early comics to *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* to your current word paintings—does the evolution of your work surprise you?
Not really. It all makes sense to me in a way. I see threads that continue through, and I've always dealt with words in some form, so it's not really a big change.

You've mentioned that you like working alone. What was it like for you to be involved in collaborative projects like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* and the music videos for Peter Gabriel and The Smashing Pumpkins?
Oh, I had tons of conflicts. I usually ended up in the captain's seat because I held the head designer job for *Pee-Wee*, so I could usually get my way. But, there are a million pitfalls when people try to create something as a group. I don't like it. I could never be a director. I was a set designer and a production designer for a while and I couldn't continue that way...I'm too prickly, you know? I don't like to be told what to do creatively and I don't like to tell other people what to do creatively. I don't particularly relish the idea of being the boss man. I hate bosses and coaches. That's what I've always rebelled against since my time in the South: coaches and teachers. Hollywood is just another version of coaches, and the director is the *head* coach. I can't stand it.

In your new book, the original frames of the art pieces are included in the photos of the work. Why is it important to keep them?
Because it stresses the object-hood of the paintings and the quality of the frame is part of the character of the work. The frame is usually scuffed up somehow and smudged, and it definitely has a history to it—along with the image—so it identifies it as a found object. And also, it's part of my aesthetic. I like low-tech and the frames help get that message across...it's an aesthetic choice.

When did you first begin doing word paintings?
Probably in late 1999. I was doing realistic history paintings that were influenced by the Hudson River Valley School of painters, Winslow Homer, and 19th century American Realism. I was buying up thrift-store paintings for their frames, and I wasn't really using any because they were so screwed up. One day, I decided I was going to paint some letters in one of my 19th century landscapes that I was painting, and I saw the frame and thought I would take the image out. But then I thought, "What if I skipped all my fancy landscape painting and just used this readymade image instead?" So it began—just a spontaneous experiment.

Are there any other specific criteria that the landscape paintings have to meet before you use them?
Well, they're all lithos. That's another thing; I don't paint on the original. There's too much human smell on the original and that would be a statement about the artists if I painted on the original, because that would obliterate forever the unique thing. I'm just painting on this mass commodity, and because of that, it's been sort of drained of meaning and become empty—ready to be filled up again.

I'm Lost on a Spaceship Momma, 2006

What comes first, the picture or the words?
The words always come first. I keep a notebook of phrases and ideas. Then, the only connection the words have with a particular painting is if it just fits or not. It's a purely practical decision. I don't want it to have any hidden meanings...I let that kind of accrue on its own. I think that's how all the best art works. The artist is just a humble soldier, putting all this together and the meaning comes if you've done it honestly enough. You can't sit there and pour meaning into it like a recipe. So, there are a lot of associations that happen after I do them and that's why I like them, that's what keeps it alive and fresh for me. I start to see the connections that I would never have cleverly done on my own, so I use accidents and juxtapositions constantly. The whole origin of these word paintings was a spontaneous gesture, so I try to stay open to spontaneity.

Seems like these phrases could be plucked from a variety of places. Where do you get them?
Some of them are from my past, some of them are overheard, some of them my wife comes up with, and others are provided by my friends. I have a second thought process going, always ready to pluck something out of real life. I'll say something or someone will say something and I'll go, "Ah, that will make a good painting." It's always there. And that's what keeps it connected to real life. That was another pleasure of working with the words; I don't have to worry about the content of the painting. I've got my content already there, so as I'm painting, I just worry about the form and color. I can enjoy stuff on its own sake.

They say comedy is the most difficult thing to write. Does the same go for painting?
Funny—there is this sort of antic quality about going back into these old paintings and bringing them back to life. Some people call it kitsch or campy, but I don't like to think of it that way because it seems a little condescending. The technique alone does have a kind of lightheartedness to it—the fact that I am using these old kitschy images—but as far as the content goes, I definitely go for the laughs. One of my themes is using humor and I think it's an open field in the art world, because art that's "funny" isn't really funny, or it's real stuffy and academically funny, or it's some lame art inside-joke or whatever. So you'll stand out if you're funny in the art world and if you can really make people laugh or find true deep humor in your work. I think humor is a great form of truth telling. I think a lot of people would agree...that's why we laugh at it, because we recognize it as the truth. Humor is way deeper, even though it seems frivolous; it's a really deep human emotion. I think humor is sacred. It's the most important thing in the world. You lose your sense of humor and you're dead; it's part of survival. I think it's a very legitimate and important theme in art and that's why I pursue it. It's one of the essentials of life. **F**

Drop the Country Boy Act, 2008