

“Wayne White Turns His Eye on Nashville at Hatch Show Print”
by Brittney McKenna / October 11, 2018



Photo: Daniel Meigs

The big block letters on the cover of the Oct. 1, 2009, issue of the Nashville Scene read “Hoozy Thinky Iz?” The letters were brightly colored, painted over an otherwise nondescript landscape — competent but forgettable, like something you’d find amid the framed second-hand paintings in a thrift shop. The artist was Wayne White. The writer of the accompanying cover story was late, great Scene editor Jim Ridley. Now, nearly a decade later, White has opened a new exhibition called *Hoozythinkyiz?* at Hatch Show Print’s Haley Gallery.

“One of the prints is ‘Hoozythinkyiz?’, which is also a tribute to Jim Ridley and the *Nashville Scene*, because that was the first time I had that image and that cover and that great interview with Jim,” says White, speaking in The Haley Gallery while setting up his show. “That’s one of my favorite pieces, actually, of all the media I’ve done. That’s one of the best interviews. So that’s a nod to Jim and to the *Nashville Scene*.”

On display now through Nov. 15, the exhibition features paintings, puppets and drawings that span White’s multi-decade career, along with three new prints White made while serving as artist-in-residence at Hatch in June. Those three prints are for sale in limited quantities.

Joshua Liner Gallery

It's midday on a Tuesday as we're speaking to White, and most folks milling about downtown are office workers looking for coffee or lunch, or a few stray tourists riding a pedal tavern. But White, who arrived in town from his home in Los Angeles late the night before, is all focus, carefully cutting shapes from large sheets of cardboard to bring to life a vision he had just hours earlier: a giant puppet of George Jones. He's made considerable progress on the puppet's head in a short period of time — Jones' hard stare and distinct jawline are already there. When White is done, the puppet will have a full body and stand against what White describes as "a red cartoonish wood-grain wall."

Though White is making this one just for the Hatch exhibition, it's not his first Jones puppet — there's an even larger one in Houston that he named "Big Lectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep." Jones himself saw a photograph of that one a year before he died in 2013. "He actually called me," White says. "That was one of the coolest days."

White worked as a set and puppet designer on the landmark children's television show *Pee-wee's Playhouse* from 1986 to 1990. That gig won him three Emmys and catapulted him from sign painting and conducting local puppet shows to directing groundbreaking music videos (Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight" and Peter Gabriel's "Big Time") and showing his work in prominent museums and galleries.

The Haley Gallery exhibition is something of a hometown show for White — or at least a home-away-from-home show. Born in Sand Mountain, Ala., and raised in Hixson, Tenn., White attended MTSU in the late '70s and spent some of his artistic formative years working at the Cumberland Science Museum (now called Adventure Science Center). Several of his more meaningful artistic achievements happened in Nashville, including working with Nashville-native artist Red Grooms and designing sets and puppets for a children's show on local public TV station WDCN (the predecessor to WNPT). That program, *Mrs. Cabobble's Caboose*, led White to the *Pee-wee's* gig. White also spent a lot of his early years in Middle Tennessee admiring Hatch Show Print from afar, so when The Haley Gallery contacted White about a potential exhibition, it was an easy decision.

"I used to come to Nashville and visit Hatch, and I was always fascinated by the history and the look of the place," he says. "The type, of course, was an obvious influence on me, that big, bold type. The boldness and graphicness of the antique typography always appealed to me. ... I never really knew anybody here [at Hatch], though. I had no connections, and I was always too timid to approach anybody."

White credits his Southern upbringing with giving him his off-kilter perspective, his ability to inject low humor into high art, and his fascination with tourist attractions and sideshow oddities. Like his 2016-17 Chattanooga gallery project *Wayne-O-Rama* — which featured, among other pieces, a giant, colorful sculpture of Lookout Mountain and its odd roadside attractions — the new exhibit pays tribute to Nashville's heritage as the epicenter of country music, a genre White came to love by way of artists like Bob Dylan. "I didn't think country was cool until I found out guys like Dylan liked it," he says.

Place plays an integral role across all of White's art. His pieces tied to cities like Nashville and Chattanooga tap into his earliest artistic roots and are both homage and exploration. His set pieces, like those on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, lend childlike innocence and curiosity to everyday objects — remember Pee-wee's pals Chairry and Clocky? In White's famous "word paintings," the odd placement of bold letters and humorous phrases ("Fuck Cubism," "Art Is Supposed to Hypnotize You or Something") within mass-produced, Thomas Kinkade-esque landscapes shakes people out of standard capitalist interpretations of art. The work encourages viewers to challenge their own definitions of "art" and, of course, to chuckle.

Joshua Liner Gallery

“Sand Mountain gave me my sense of the Southern gothic,” says White. “It’s also home to the Louvin Brothers, who I love. They’re part of what got me into country music.”

White’s two larger-than-life Louvin Brothers puppets — part of his 2017 retrospective at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, *Thrill After Thrill: Thirty Years of Wayne White* — recently found a permanent home at the Country Music Hall of Fame. In the ’80s, White drew figures like Hank Williams and Patsy Cline as part of his *Nashville Sketchbook*. For *Hoozythinkyiz?* he’s drawn some new figures, including Rose Maddox, Hank Snow, and Buck Owens and the Buckaroos.

In White’s drawing of the Buckaroos, the figures’ bodies are monochromatic and simply rendered, but their heads are colorful, nuanced, almost scribbled and alive with motion. As Ridley pointed out in his 2009 story, White finds a muse in the human head, and these new drawings follow suit.

“Everything I do is really just subconscious,” White says. “But I guess I do have a thing about heads.”