



“The Designer Behind ‘Pee-Wee’s Playhouse’ Pays Tribute to Coked-Up Country Stars”
by Laura Hutson Hunter / October 9, 2018



Photo credit: Parker Young

Wayne White has the kind of swagger you never expect from a puppeteer. The Tennessee-born, L.A.-based artist made a name for himself as the set designer behind *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* — he’s the one responsible for the iconic, cheerily over-the-top look of the Saturday morning kids show, and he won three Emmys for it. In his second act, he became a successful fine artist by scavenging thrift-stores for paintings of landscapes and using them as backgrounds for word paintings that position oversized ironic phrases like “Clusterfuck” and “LSD” and “Maybe Now I’ll Get The Respect I So Richly Deserve” alongside kitschy barnyard scenes. A monograph of his word paintings was published by designer Todd Oldham, he made music videos for Peter Gabriel and the Smashing Pumpkins, and he’s the subject of a 2012 documentary *Beauty Is Embarrassing*. He’s got clout.

Even so, he’s still a Tennessee boy at heart, and this month he returns to Nashville, where he got his start as a puppeteer in the early 80s on a music-education TV show called *Mrs. Cabobble’s Caboose*. White is the artist-in-residence at the storied print shop Hatch Show Print on Nashville’s lower Broadway, a historic neighborhood that’s littered with flashing neon and smoky honky-tonks. Hatch’s history dates back to 1879, and its archive — now housed inside the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum — is full of posters of minstrels, vaudeville acts, circus performers, and lots and lots of country musicians. It’s a perfect fit for White, whose love of country music and Southern culture travels through his work like a live current. *VICE* spoke to White about his work, his adoration for country singer George Jones, and what he’s planning for the corresponding exhibition at Hatch.



White constructing one of his sculptures. Photo credit: Parker Young.

VICE: Last year you had *Wayne-O-Rama* and the 30-year retrospective at Hunter in Chattanooga, and this year you're doing this pretty high-profile collaboration with Hatch Show Print, which is a pretty influential Nashville institution. It seems like you're pretty comfortable getting back to your Southern roots and putting shows together that have to do with Southern history.

Wayne White: I'm always eager and happy to return to the South with my art, because I'm a Southerner, and my art is basically about that in subtle, and not so subtle, ways. It's who I am as a person. I was raised in the culture, and for better or for worse it's reflected in my work. So being able to return and show it in that Southern context is always fun and fascinating. Coming to Nashville and working at Hatch Show Print is sort of a dream come true for me. I've always been a fan of Hatch Show Print, ever since I was an art student at MTSU in Murfreesboro back in the '70s, and I visited Hatch several times over the years and I love everything about it. It's been, visually, a big influence on me — those posters and the typography is definitely an influence on my word paintings that a lot of people know me by. So it was a perfect fit and kind of a fantasy for me to actually work at Hatch—it's the church of type. I loved it, and I'm happy to show the three prints that I made there in June along with a new suite of work about country music.

Amazing. So are you planning on making puppets for this show?

There will be sculptural heads—one of George—but no puppets. And then there's a series of 15 or 16 drawings and watercolors of country music stars from the 50s and 60s, mostly. That's something I've been doing for years, and I'll probably have my original sketchbook from the 80s where I started all this. I was in Nashville in 1985, and I did a show called Mrs. Cabobble's Caboose. That was my first professional job as a set designer and a puppet maker. Nashville was a very important place that helped form me as an artist. That's when I started doing the country music drawings, thinking about the Opry and the past. So I've been doing those off and on for 30 years, and I'm really excited to be



And I chose that title for the show, too. It's my take on being a Southerner. That's kind of the reaction that I got from Southern culture when I dared to try to become an artist. Everyone asked, "Who's he think he is? Gettin' above his raisin', thinkin' he's all better than me, thinkin' he's an artist!" That kind of thing. Plus it's a kind of universal personal insecurity that a lot of people have—imposter syndrome. And I associate it with Nashville because a few years ago I did the cover of the Nashville Scene, and I used the same term for that cover. That's back when I had a wonderful interview with the late Jim Ridley, so I'm sort of reprising that as the title. That's one of my favorite interviews of all time with him, and I really treasure that memory.

There's a cubist caricature called "Fucked Up in Nashville" that features a pilled-out coked-up musician — is that a reference to somebody in particular?

It's not anybody specific, but it's definitely a Country-and-Western singer from the 60s. You can tell because he's got the Nudie suit, the hair slicked back, he's poppin' pills, drinkin' whiskey and snortin' cocaine. It's just sort of a bawdy look at the reality of what fueled a lot of country music back then—people on the road, people popping pills all the time. That's what happened! Everybody was on pills.

Yeah, and that's music in general, but a lot of other genres of music get more tied to drug use. That's punk rock or metal. But that's more out in the open, maybe.

Yes, Country music hides it because it has this pious religious side, you know. They have to cater to a very conservative crowd, but the reality is just as crazy and wild as any rock 'n' roll scene.

Right, like George Jones was a notorious drunk and addict. You've included a print of him in this collection, and in the past you've also made a huge head of George Jones. What's with this fascination?

Number one, I'm just a huge fan of George Jones. He's probably my favorite singer—country or otherwise. I just think he's an emotional genius and a genius at expressing emotion. I'm just a crazy big fan of his. And visually, he's so much fun to draw because he's so goofy looking, and he's always got those beautiful suits on and he's an amazing character.



I just found out that the reason they call him the Possum is because he looks like a possum. That's it.

Right! He's got those close together eyes, that long pointy nose. I'm just drawn to him for his talent and for his interesting quirksiness as a human being. I've drawn him and sculpted his head in all kinds of ways for the past 30 years. The biggest one, of course, was my "World's Largest George Jones Head" that I made down in Houston, Texas, at Rice University in 2009. That was a giant puppet head laying on its side, and it was 25 feet long, and about 14 or 15 feet tall. You could pull a rope and make his mouth open and close, and he was snoring—he was sleeping it off, I think. He had whiskey breath that would come out of his mouth.

Wait, really? How?

I had a big bowl of whiskey with a cloth soaking it up with a fan blowing through the cloth! So it wafted out when you opened up this giant door-like mouth. And then you go around back and there's a little peep show inside his head and it's George Jones dancing onstage in a weird haunted honky-tonk. It's kind of like this horrible repetitive nightmarish vision that he's having in his head. So it's comic and it's tragic. He's got everything. And I like that. Where comedy and tragedy meet is a fascinating place. And it makes for good drama. So I try to be respectful but, you know, it's funny.

Yeah, I mean, when you're making a giant puppet head of someone, there's only so much seriousness you can allow yourself.

Yeah! And the man himself called me and thanked me! That was amazing.

Amazing. So are you planning on making puppets for this show?

There will be sculptural heads—one of George—but no puppets. And then there's a series of 15 or 16 drawings and watercolors of country music stars from the 50s and 60s, mostly. That's something I've been doing for years, and I'll probably have my original sketchbook from the 80s where I started all this. I was in Nashville in 1985, and I did a show called *Mrs. Cabobble's Caboose*. That was my first professional job as a set designer and a puppet maker. Nashville was a very important place that helped form me as an artist. That's when I started doing the country music drawings, thinking about the Opry and the past. So I've been doing those off and on for 30 years, and I'm really excited to be able to mount a show that has that at its core. They're mostly small works on paper. I'm doing my version of what Elizabeth Peyton does, but with country music instead of Kurt Cobain. I'm doing my intimate look at this musical genre and these heroes and icons trying to present scenes that are more intimate—like Hank Williams getting off a plane in Germany with Minnie Pearl. Sort of off-kilter scenes of everyday life.

In your Ted Talk, you talk about the romance of the past. I think this exhibit sounds like a perfect confluence of inspirational elements for you—making new work in the Hatch show space, in the tradition of all these artists who, as far as the art world goes, are as blue collar and as working class as you can get. I'm interested in hearing what you'd have to say about the romance of the past as it pertains to country music and Nashville.

Well, I've always loved history and the stories of the past, things that came before I was born. It's always fascinated me. And growing up in Chattanooga, it's a very historical place. I just lived in the past as a kid. I loved stories about the Cherokee Indians and the Civil War, all of this stuff that happened around me that's long gone now. I think it's sort of a fascination with coming to terms with mortality too. It's kind of how I learned that all of this will pass as a kid. It was a deep lesson in the cycles of life, in a way. Trying to wrap your mind around this world that's gone, there's not a trace of it left. It was a completely different world, and now it's vanished. How did that happen? And all of a sudden you think, "Oh yeah, I'm in a world, and it's going to vanish, too." So it was a philosophical thing to chew on, and to learn about life and death. But it was also a pure joy and fantasy to project yourself into one of these worlds. So I both enjoyed it as a fantasy, and it sobered me as a human being to know that I'm part of an eternal cycle. Country music to me represents Southern culture in a lot of ways. It's just storytellin', really, when it comes down to it. Nobody tells stories better than country music.

History is a deep thing in the South. There's such a pervasive love for history and for the environment and storytelling, especially in rural areas. But then there's also the problematic sides of oppressive behaviors and things that are outdated, or maybe still happening, being celebrated in the culture. So there's a lot to mine.

There's a very dark side to Southern culture—that's pretty obvious. I don't really touch on those nerves directly, although I think there's a bit of a melancholy about my work that is aware of that and it comes through regardless. I don't try to be up-to-date topically or politically with my work, but I think there is sort of a depressed feeling to a lot of the things I do. The best kind of humor has a little melancholy to it.

Absolutely. That's one of the things that I find so interesting about Pee-wee's Playhouse. That scene was so successful and is still treated with reverence, and I think a lot of it is because it's a kids show that has this subtly dark edge to it. I wouldn't even call it a darkness—just an edge, or a melancholy, like you said. Right, because we were adult artists making it. And it never really was a kids show—the original stage show was a parody of kids shows for adults, with all kinds of adult humor in it. And

Joshua Liner Gallery

Right, because we were adult artists making it. And it never really was a kids show—the original stage show was a parody of kids shows for adults, with all kinds of adult humor in it. And so it was convenient to present it on TV as a kids show, but it really wasn't. It was still a parody of a kids show, cleaned up enough for Saturday mornings, but we never saw it as a kids show. We did it for ourselves, we did it for our sense of humor, and we were a particular bunch of artists who were really interested in childhood, especially our late-50s early-60s childhoods, which we reflected into the look and the color and the feel—it's very retro. And it had this expressionistic edge, like German Expressionism, German cinema like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and these weird irregular edges, which was happening in 80s fine art too—this return to expressionism. And a return to pop art and irony, with Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf and that East Village crowd. That was all in there too. We were just another East Village art project, really. We just happened to get on national television.

Were you friendly with Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf? Did you run in the same circles?

I didn't know them, no. I was sort of in a different crowd than them—namely the un-famous crowd. But I heard they were jealous of the show, ha!