

“King of the Weird Frontier”  
Joyce Lovelace / September 2019



Wayne White's outsized imagination and sense of humor have taken him from Pee-wee's Playhouse to music videos to art galleries.

Wayne White has always seen life as theater, an epic tale of romance, action, tragedy, and comedy – lots and lots of comedy.

“Humor is underrated. It's seen as lesser than drama, but it's more important,” says the artist, whose gift for reveling in the ridiculous has carried him through the ups and downs of a brilliant, even legendary, 35-year creative career in the often unforgiving arenas of show business and fine art. “Humor is probably our most sacred quality. Because without it, we're dead.”

All the world's a stage for White, whether he's drawing, painting, sculpting, performing, or concocting off-the-wall puppets, sets, or animated effects for TV. His best-known credit – “the biggest thing in my life, still, to this day” – is *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, the beloved 1980s kids series that, in its colorful, irrational exuberance, practically defined the over-the-top visual zeitgeist of the decade.

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“Again, I’m building sets and puppets. Only now I get to call it art,” he says over coffee in the breakfast nook of the 1940s house in Los Angeles where he lives with his wife, noted cartoonist and writer Mimi Pond, and their eclectic assortment of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and vintage kitsch. Tall, with a scruffy gray beard and intense light-blue eyes, the 61-year-old is a raconteur, a Southern gentleman by way of hip New York and LA, endearing and at times charmingly profane. Often, to punch up his stories, he’ll break into character voices, spoofing the various personas he’s inhabited over the years: hillbilly, angry young man, starstruck kid, hotshot “minor-artist-celebrity guy,” jaded showbiz veteran, serious artiste. All find expression, one way or another, in his vast, multidisciplinary body of work. “I’m all about handmade stuff,” he says, and for him it begins with drawing. “Everything is about a pencil and paper.”

White’s big adventure began in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he was born and raised. The macho football culture of the South was “a good thing to rebel against,” so he became “the kid who could draw. I had that strong identity, and I never wanted to be anything else.” Lacking mentors, he got his art education from Time-Life books on famous artists, Bullwinkle and Bugs Bunny cartoons, record-album covers and liner notes, magazines such as *MAD* (“my bible as a kid”), *National Lampoon*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Creem*, and the underground comic art of R. Crumb and Ralph Steadman. These opened a window to a big outside world and the counterculture of the 1970s. “It was exciting,” he remembers, “that sense of risk-taking and anarchy and self-invention.”

White majored in painting at Middle Tennessee State University, where he met other young artists, cool cats and weirdos like himself, and saw how art could be a way of life. He and his friends would build hand-and-rod puppets out of cardboard, foam rubber, and other street junk (the same materials he uses now), and put on shows at keg parties. At first an outdoorsy hippie, he changed with the times. “Overnight, punk rock came along, and I cut off all my hair and dreamed of New York.”

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In 1981, he headed to Greenwich Village, got an apartment above the Pink Pussycat erotic boutique and a job as a short-order cook, and took “an immersive jump into New York City at its grittiest.” It was the dawn of the *Bright Lights, Big City* downtown scene, where he could spot rising art star Jean-Michel Basquiat on the street or watch a nearly-famous Madonna perform at Danceteria. In this world, he was “the Southerner,” and he played it to the hilt, to set himself apart. By essentially “stalking” them, he got to work as a studio assistant for two of his favorite artists: Art Spiegelman, creator of the Holocaust-themed graphic novel *Maus*, and Pop Art sculptor Red Grooms, a fellow Tennessean. White fancied himself a modern-day Davy Crockett, surviving on a wild urban frontier. But by early 1985, having spent several years shopping his own artwork around without success, he was ground down, depressed, and ready to give up and go home to Tennessee.

Right on cue, the plot twisted. He met Pond, already an acclaimed cartoonist, at a gallery opening, and they fell in love. “Things can turn on a dime in New York City,” White says with a clap of his hands. All at once, he started getting work as a cartoonist and illustrator. Later that year, a friend invited him over to Nashville to art-direct a new local kids TV show called *Mrs. Cabobble’s Caboose*. He went all out, crafting sets and puppets in an aesthetic he describes as “Little Golden Books meets *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.” It had precursor written all over it.

Then, just like in the movies, came his big break. Back in New York, he was hired to join the creative team behind Pee-wee Herman’s latest project, a Saturday morning kids series. He got to design and build all the puppets, collaborate on the sets with Gary Panter and Ric Heitzman, and voice characters Randy, Dirty Dog, Mr. Kite, and Roger the Monster. The show was filmed in a makeshift studio in a former sweatshop. “It was funky and crazy and fraught with problems. ... I didn’t care. I was working on the coolest thing in the world!”

At heart, *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* was a parody of a kids show, made for adults, by artists. Its creator and star, Paul Reubens, “was very open-minded and artistic himself, so he became our champion,” says White. “We didn’t have to worry about the suits from CBS. We just had to answer to Paul, and he was the best boss there was, because he was cool, he liked cool stuff, and he was exactly like us. So we just went to town.” Drawing from their late-boomer childhoods, they devised a look that was sweetly retro, but also edgy, asymmetrical, anti-Muppet. The series premiered in fall 1986 and was a massive hit.

“We created this new formula, this handmade, homemade, in-your-face expressionistic thing. And it exploded,” White recalls. “All of a sudden, my life was changed forever.”

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When the show moved to LA, White and Pond did, too. (Married in 1988, they have two children, Woodrow and Lulu, now in their 20s and both artists.) On the strength of his overnight success with *Pee-wee*, White took on prestigious projects, such as a spectacularly trippy music video for Peter Gabriel's 1986 hit "Big Time" (a decade later he'd dream up a Georges Méliès-inspired phantasmagoria for "Tonight, Tonight" by the Smashing Pumpkins). In those days, before digital animation became the industry norm, he created astonishing stop-motion effects with physical materials – paper, found objects, little crank toys. While he acknowledges the ingenuity of today's computer-generated imagery, "it's not got the hands-on. It's not a handmade object with real light falling on it. There's just a feel there. It's warm. People say vinyl is a warmer sound than digital. It's because there's human sweat on it."

White went on to other successes after *Pee-wee's Playhouse* ended in 1990, designing children's programs such as the original *Shining Time Station* (the *Thomas the Tank Engine* series, which starred Ringo Starr for one season), and the Disney Channel's *Circle Time*. But then came shows that got canceled and pilots that didn't get picked up. "This is the downside of showbiz. You give your heart and soul to something, and it flops."

Disillusioned and burned out, he started painting again in the late '90s. One day, having bought some treacly landscapes at a thrift shop to scavenge their frames, he decided instead to paint big, bold, intrusive words on the scenery. The first of these canvases proclaimed *Human F\*ckin Knowledge*, his contention that "people really don't know anything. Everybody's guessing." The phrases kept on coming: *D\* Jokes from Sherman Oaks*; *Drop the Country Boy Act*; *All That Fake Laughin for Nothin*. Soon they were in galleries, commanding critical attention, and White had commenced his third act, set in the fine-art world. He knew his word paintings would be compared to the famous ones of Ed Ruscha, but he shrugs it off. "I have a different attitude. His are cool. Mine are comedy," he says. "And don't tell anybody, but I consider myself" – his voice drops to a stage whisper – "a poet."

In 2012, White played the plum role of himself in *Beauty Is Embarrassing*, an award-winning, feature-length documentary about his life and work in which Reubens and *The Simpsons* creator Matt Groening, among others, attest to his twisted genius. To promote the film, he crafted a one-man stage show that he still performs, in which he gets to ham it up, strum a banjo, spin yarns, crack wise, and dispense playful yet earnest bits of homespun wisdom. His advice to young creatives: Let go of insecurity.

"Your studio is this place where anything goes. Anything goes! Even the goofiest, stupidest thing goes. You suspend judgment when you're trying to create something. That's where the best stuff comes from."