

‘Word painting’ artist Wayne White brings 14-foot-tall puppets to the Seattle Art Fair”
by Nicole Brodeur / July 26, 2018



“THEY PLUNDERED OUR ART AND THEN WAITED AND WATCHED FROM THE RIDGE AS WE MADE MORE,” 2017, acrylic on vintage offset lithograph, 28 x 52 inches

The artist, who has won Emmys for creating the characters and puppets for "Pee-wee's Playhouse," is working round the clock to finish his latest puppets: large depictions of the first two women to land in Seattle, sisters Louisa and Mary Ann Boren.

Isn't it high time the Boren sisters get their due?

If not for them, the 24-member Denny Party never would have landed their schooner on the shores of Alki Beach in 1851 to make a claim on Seattle. Instead, the men on the schooner, drunk on the ironically named cocktail called "Blue Ruin," would have let their boat go over the Cascade Falls.

So when artist Wayne White comes here to participate in the Seattle Art Fair next month, he will unveil two, 14-foot-tall puppets created to honor Louisa and Mary Ann Boren. The piece, called "Here Come the Boren Sisters," is not just a nod to the sisters, but also to "Here Come the Brides," a love-and-lumberjacks show that ran from 1968-70.

The two giant puppets will be rigged up to the ceiling. Giant marionettes, really, that fair attendees will be able to move by pulling a rope.

A little pop culture, a little history played on a huge scale. A "crazy machine" that allows White, 60, to stay the kid who wanted to invent things like Thomas Edison.



“BRAIN TO BRAIN,” 2016, acrylic on vintage offset lithograph, 28 x 44 inches

“I love giants, I love big figures and I want to get lost in a world,” White said over the phone the other day, his Tennessee lilt still there. “I want an enveloping fantasy when I look at a picture, and giants do that for me. Whenever I can make something I draw or paint come alive and move, I love that.”

White’s offbeat, kitschy talent has served him well. He won three Emmys for creating the characters and puppets for the wonderfully subversive “Pee-wee’s Playhouse” and an MTV Video Music Award for art directing the video for The Smashing Pumpkins’ “Tonight, Tonight.” He also art-directed the groundbreaking video for Peter Gabriel’s 1986 hit “Big Time.”

Over the last 18 years, White has also made a name — and a tidy living — with his “word paintings”: Phrases that he paints on cheap landscape paintings he finds in thrift shops around his Los Angeles neighborhood.

The phrases are tall, curved, snake around trees and stretch to the horizon. They’re ironic and cutting: “Cheap Bastard,” “15 Minutes” and “I’m Gonna Play Like You Didn’t Say That.” One, with letters the pastel color of candy, reads: “They Plundered Our Art and Then Waited and Watched from the Ridge as We Made More.”

The paintings started completely spontaneously, White said, “seemingly as a spur-of-the-moment joke, and then they kind of revealed themselves to me,” he said. “That’s the best art. It’s kind of a surprise and then you discover what it is. There’s no recipe. It’s often a mystery while you’re doing it.”

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“The Louvin Brothers”, 2014, cardboard, acrylic paint, wood, rope

“I won’t make an image of the president,” he said. “I don’t want to make myself do it. I don’t want to give him any attention and use my talent in any sort of way towards him.”

White’s representative, Joshua Liner Gallery, will be at the Seattle Art Fair, displaying and selling White’s word paintings, which fetch up to \$30,000.

“I tell people that I paint big words,” White explained. “Sometimes I just say, ‘Oh, I’m a landscape painter.’ I hate to break it down. Most artists don’t want to do that.

“I create beauty.”

White was the subject of a 2012 documentary called “Beauty is Embarrassing,” which chronicled his Tennessee upbringing, his love of cartooning and his career as an artist and a puppeteer who started doing “punk rock puppet shows” in New York.

That work led to making puppets and sets for the Nashville-based public-television children’s show, “Mrs. Cabobble’s Caboose,” before his big break with “Pee-wee’s Playhouse.”

But it is the Boren sisters who have White working against the clock. He has created a model that he posted on Instagram, and will assemble and paint it in a South Seattle warehouse this week with a crew of volunteers.

“I always like to do history stories whenever I do these things,” White said. “I didn’t want to do the obvious stuff: grunge, the Space Needle. It’s a little too cliché.”

He also wanted to create female characters for a change.

Joshua Liner Gallery

“I’m always doing guys,” White said, such as the head of 29-year-old Congressional hopeful Lyndon B. Johnson (which White wore with a white shirt and tie) and a much larger head of the country singer George Jones, which was displayed on its side at the Rice University art gallery in Houston.

(“It’s a roadside attraction, a museum relic of a lost world, and a big, weird toy still in its box,” was how White described it in his artist’s statement.)

White was drawn to the Boren sisters for being the first two women to land in Seattle and for not being “crybabies.”

“I like their story,” he said. “I think Louisa was the one who brought the rose that grows all over Seattle. And their husbands were brothers, too, which is kind of weird.” (It’s true; the sisters married brothers Arthur and David Denny.)

As a kid growing up in Tennessee, White was taken by the outsized culture of tourist attractions. Roadside wonders and big promises of fantasy come true. All you had to do was pull over for a spell.

“They were my first idea of art,” White said of places like “Confederama” and the “Lookout Mountain Incline Railway.”

“That’s a big part of everyday America,” White said. “Hype and fantasy and things pitched, especially to little kids. The comic-book ads of my youth were outrageous. They were exciting.

“It was drama and theater and spectacle. And, it was a bit of a hustle.”

With the puppets, White hopes to make the Boren sisters “this giant reality that you can’t deny. I am sort of willing them into significance.”

He would love to introduce Mayor Jenny Durkan to the sisters so that the city of Seattle can give “Here Come the Boren Sisters” a proper place.

“I want the mayor to come down and I will officially hand them over,” White said. “They’re your problem now.”