

'Chattanooga Fun House': Volunteers help Wayne-O-Rama go big and bold [video]

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David Marmer paints a section of the Sequoyah puppet head while preparing for the opening of Wayne-O-Rama.
Photo by Angela Lewis /Times Free Press.

For Elliot Cowan, getting the chance to work under the tutelage of artist/designer Wayne White was too good to pass up, even if it meant driving 12 hours and putting in nine-hour days of volunteer work for four days.

“I couldn’t pass it up,” says Cowan, and Australian-born artist/ animator. “I would have done it 24 hours a day.”

White is a Hixson-born artist best known for his Emmy-award winning design work on “Pee-wee’s Playhouse.” He also is known for creating oversized puppets out of cardboard and wood, a talent on display in the work he’s creating as part of Wayne-O-Rama, a year-long project and ambitious undertaking that uses giant puppets and large public installations to highlight the people, places and events that influenced White while he was growing up.

Wayne-O-Rama is housed in a studio on Rossville Avenue, a space White has dubbed the “Chattanooga Fun House.” A grand opening will take place on Saturday, complete with live music, a proclamation from Chattanooga Mayor Andy Berke and Hamilton County Mayor Jim Copping to declare “Wayne White Celebration of Art and Education Day in Chattanooga, Tennessee.”

Cowan, who lives in Queens, N.Y., also builds sculptures out of cardboard. His pieces are not much more than a foot tall, however, while White’s can be 10, 14, 20 times that.

“I live in an apartment and work at the kitchen table,” Cowan explains.

A longtime fan of White’s, Cowan became aware of Wayne-O-Rama via their Facebook friendship, so when White invited him to come down and be part of it, he volunteered, calling it “the chance of a lifetime.”

“We’d never met, but I dropped him a note asking how things were going and he invited me down,” Cowan says. “I thought, ‘You know what? I’ll feel like I missed out if I don’t.’”

Cowan is not alone in his desire to work on the project, according to Jennifer Crutchfield, who has been handling marketing it. People have come from California, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Connecticut, Florida and locally to work with White and be a part of something special, she says.

Joshua Liner Gallery

“We’ve had probably 800 volunteers since September,” Crutchfield says. “Students, kids, families. About eight a day. It really has been neat.”

Cowan drove down Oct. 25, expecting to stay two days and instead stayed four. He was assigned the task of building a five-foot-tall puppet head of former Chattanooga Times and New York Times Publisher Adolph Ochs.

“Oh man, I enjoyed myself and, after a bit, I got this feeling of being connected to it,” Cowan says. “I didn’t do all of it, but I reckon I did most of the bits and pieces.”

In addition to the Ochs head, there are puppets depicting other Chattanooga notables such as actor Samuel L. Jackson, blues legend Bessie Smith, Emma Wheeler, a pioneering black woman who opened a hospital here, local TV kids show icon Bob Brandy and radio and TV legend Luther Masingill, among others.

There also is a giant model of Lookout Mountain made of Styrofoam and wood with scenes depicting Rock City, Ruby Falls and the Incline Railway, complete with a working train.

The model also includes figures representing explorers who have roamed the mountain over the years, Cherokee Indians, even a sabertooth tiger because of a skull found on Lookout years ago.

“It’s an epic sort of view of the mountain because it captures the magic of the mountain,” White says.

White has said the city’s tourist attractions and especially the campaigns promoting them have played a huge role in his art over the years.

“I always say in my talks that my first idea of the art world was Chattanooga’s tourist attractions,” he says. “They took the beautiful landscape and history and memories and heightened it and dramatized and made it sexier and charged you to see it.”

Wayne-O-Rama is co-produced by the Shaking Ray Levi Society with support from the Benwood Foundation, the Footprint Foundation, Lyndhurst Foundation and the McKenzie Foundation.

The studio space on Rossville Avenue is officially known as Tenn art and will be home to Shaking Ray events such as concerts, art workshops and student field trips through September of next year.

Wayne-O-Rama will be open between 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays.

Hannah Hahn, education coordinator with Art 120, an art-in-education advocacy organization, helped coordinate students from Howard High School to volunteer on the project.

“They have art classes at Howard, but they don’t get to see art on the scale of this, especially art that relates to their own city,” she says. “They got to work alongside a team put together by an Emmy-Award winning artist who started from humble beginnings here who can show them that they can make a career of making art.”

White and crew try to match skill level to each volunteer. The students, for instance, were tasked with priming some of the pieces with paint, Hahn says.

“They got to ask a lot of questions, like ‘Why are we doing this?’” she says. “The kids also said the work was very relaxing for them. They could step back and relax and chill.”

White hopes Wayne-O-Rama “will be an inspiration for the young and old, reflecting not only the Southern experience but also reaching out to the whole world.”

“It’s a vision that welcomes everyone.”

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