



Puppeteer/Artist Wayne White on his Fascination with History, Dark Humor, & Latest Work, 'Monitorium'  
by Anthony Harris / January 18, 2018



Installation View of Wayne White's Monitorium, Virginia MOCA

A puppeteer from Chattanooga who gets his big break in New York developing a groundbreaking television show that ends up influencing a generation, then goes on to make his mark in the art world — not a story you hear every day, but one that describes the beginning and current career of artist Wayne White. Squeezed in the middle somewhere, is the move to Hollywood, award-winning music videos, and even more television shows, which is not bad for a kid from the deep south who took inspiration from Robert Crumb comics.

White's latest work, *Monitorium*, explores the Battle of Hampton Roads in a multi-media installation and is currently on display at Virginia MOCA. The artist recently sat down with *RVA Mag* founder Tony Harris to discuss the exhibit, his fascination with history and dark humor, and how he jump-started his career with puppet shows.



Wayne White

**Tony Harris:** I went to the show and I loved it. When did the idea for the exhibit come to you?

**Wayne White:** It was last year. I came to the museum to do a talk and had plans that I was going to do this exhibit the following year, and most of these projects, like I've done nine of them now in different cities, and they're always based on the local history of the place that I'm working at. I started looking around at the rich history of that area, and specifically, I went to the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, and I saw the great exhibit they have there on the Monitor and the Merrimack, and that cinched it for me because I always love that story.

**Harris:** Had you been to Hampton Roads before?

**White:** No, I've never been to {the} area before. Of course, I'm from Chattanooga, and I grew up with Civil War history, and I've always been interested in the Civil War, so that story was just a natural for me.

**Harris:** What was interesting to you about the Battle of Hampton Roads?

**White:** I was less interested in the actual battle, but of course that's a big part of the story. Just the technology, and the wonder of The Monitor and the new ironclads at the time. The drama of the technology, more than the drama of the war, was my real inspiration. How completely crazy these things must have looked to people at the time, and they did, these iron ships that everybody laughed at and said they were going to sink, and they looked like nothing else before, and they're basically a submarine almost, the monitors at least. Everything's below water level. So many crazy new innovations, it was a real radical piece of warfare, and the drama of that radical breakthrough was what interested me more than the actual battle.

**Harris:** I couldn't imagine being the first guy on that ship.

**White:** Yeah, and of course, I wanted to take the human side of it too. I was really more interested in the crew members and the life and the impact on their lives and what it must have felt like to be part of a guinea pig in this thing. I was very much inspired by a book by Monitor Boys. I used that book very much, and that was my reference for the project.



**Harris:** Would you have volunteered to be on the ship?

**White:** No. [laughs] It was a hellish experience. They hadn't worked out all the bugs and it was very dangerous, especially down below. Horrible insulation, the steam-powered engines would nearly kill everyone from carbon monoxide poisoning, it leaked very badly, it was always on the verge of sinking, lots of bailing out, especially out in the ocean. It's one thing in the harbor, but out in the big waves, it must have been really crazy.

**Harris:** That makes sense with the actual exhibit. I felt like it had a fun, zany quality, but then it also felt kind of dark.

**White:** Yeah, literally and metaphorically. I always try to have humor in there, because that's my take on the human condition, there is always an element of absurdity and humor with whatever humans take on, and of course, my work is very much about having a humorous take on things.

**Harris:** In times like this, how important is humor?

**White:** Humor is always important, especially in times like this. It's our number one survival tool. Without humor, you're dead. You have to be able to laugh at things, laugh at yourself, laugh at the human condition, know that we're all, on a certain level, fool, that all is vanity, and that people will always act out their ego, and the ego is one of the most absurd things there is. And humor is important, too, because it's a great way to communicate. It's a great way to break the ice. Once you get somebody laughing, they're going to like you and they're going to listen to what you have to say.

**Harris:** Is that what you're hoping people take from your word paintings?

**White:** Very much so. I want to talk about the human condition without preaching. I want to find a common ground that everybody can agree, have a good laugh, and then maybe go a little deeper from there.

**Harris:** I was reading about your early career in New York. What was the city like when you got there from Chattanooga?

**White:** This was around 1981 or '82, so the city was still pretty funky back then, nothing like it is today. It was still the New York of old, pretty much just like it was in the 70s. It was quite a culture shock coming from Tennessee. I've visited a few times before. It was wild and wooly. And I liked that. I liked the myth of the country bumpkin coming into the big, mean city.

**Harris:** How did you end up working on *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*?

**White:** I went to school in Tennessee as a painting major at Middle Tennessee State University. There, I started doing puppet shows just as a goof. I would do them at keg parties or out on the street. Me and my friend Mike Quinn started doing them. He originally did some puppets for a class of his. To get out of doing some kind of term paper, he did a puppet show instead. So we took those puppets and turned them into a punk rock puppet show called Punk and Juicy. We considered it a kind of performance art. It was anti-puppet show. It was definitely a product of the times, that's when punk rock just came out; Andy Kaufman, Mr. Bill on *Saturday Night Live*, this kind of violent deconstruction of puppetry. Anti-Muppets. I'd do a couple a year, and I kept doing them in New York at house parties. and then one of my friends back in Tennessee got a job at a local PBS station in Nashville, and they wanted to do a puppet show for kids and produce it there. And lo and behold, I got the job. I went back down from New York to Nashville and did my first professional show called Mrs. Cabobble's Caboose. I did that, and I took that portfolio back to New York and showed it to Broadcast Arts, the production company that was doing *Pee-Wee*, and got a job on *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, and that was the big break in my career. It really changed everything for me.

**Harris:** When you were a kid growing up, who inspired you?

**White:** Comic books, like most American kids, were a big inspiration of mine. Mad magazine was huge for me. I loved *Mad* and all the artists in it, and their attitude, their satire on the culture. Along with millions and millions of other kids, that really formed me a lot. I loved movies and TV shows, of course, it was a typical American childhood. There was no real art in Chattanooga, so I got my aesthetics from pop culture like most kids. I loved the Superman comics. I worshipped the movie *Mary Poppins* when it first came out, that just blew my mind. That was a big influence on me, especially Bert the Chimney Sweep drawing pictures on the sidewalk and then jumping into the picture.

**Harris:** That was a combination of live-action and cartoons.

**White:** That segment especially was huge for me, and it's sort of what I do now. I create these hand-drawn, painted, hand-made worlds that you can literally go into. I loved the idea of making your own world like that. And of course, I love toys, I loved the Fort Apache Playset by Marx. I loved the View-Master, that was a real big influence on me, the fact that this incredible illusion of another world through these tiny portals you can look through. All of these ideas of escaping into another world, that was real important to my imagination.

**Harris:** Were you a fan of Robert Crumb?

**White:** I was. When I first discovered *Underground Comics* in junior high school about 13 or 14 years old, Robert Crumb was a huge influence on me. I imitated his drawing style, again, like millions of others. I was the cartoonist on my junior high school newspaper. Crumb was a big lesson in art for me because he drew this innocent old-fashioned, old-timey cartoon style, yet the stories he told were very dark and weird and twisted and reflected the times, the sex, drugs, and rock n' roll that was going on. So there's this real interesting clash between the innocent, cartoony style and the darkness that he presented, and the two kind of worked together in this new thrilling kind of way.

**Harris:** How was it working in Hollywood?

**White:** It had its ups and downs. I'm lucky that I had a long a career as I've had. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* opened up all the doors for me in Hollywood, it was so influential and such a big hit that I got to be the guy from *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* and so, that got me a lot a work. Mostly kid's shows, but in commercials and rock videos too. I was lucky to be in on some really cool projects, like Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight" video, Beakman's World for CBS, and the Snapple commercials, things like that.

**Harris:** When did you make the decision to transition into fine art?

**White:** It's something that I always wanted to get back to. That's what every artist wants to do, is to be independent is to follow his or her own vision, and that was only my dream in the back of my head. I was grateful for the work in Hollywood and they paid well, I raised two kids and bought a house here in Hollywood and everything else, but it mostly wasn't creatively fulfilling because I was always working for somebody else or fleshing somebody else's vision out. I finally got {to} do my own thing starting about 17 years ago when my word paintings started to catch on in the art world and slowly, I got to cross over into the fine art world and make a living there selling paintings and sculptures doing these installations, like in Virginia Beach.

**Harris:** Have you always had a strong connection to history?

**White:** Always. Growing up in Chattanooga was a very big influence. Every place has its history. Chattanooga especially has a colorful past that they created a whole tourist industry around. The history of the Civil War, the Cherokee Indian, things like that. I grew up in north Chattanooga in the woods, and that was always my favorite fantasy, was the past. Playing Civil War or Davy Crockett in the woods. The past especially was my favorite fantasy. The idea of a vanished world that actually existed was way more exciting that something just made up out of pure imagination.

**Harris:** That sounds like the American family in the 1950s, this idealistic, simple time.

**White:** In a way, it was. I think the south in the '60s was still behind the rest of world. It was still the '50s in the south during the 60s. Now everything's sort of up to speed and everyone's on the same page because of the internet, but back then, you could have pockets of the country that were a little more retrograde and information wasn't bombarding you all the time, and you could feel like you were nestled away somewhere. That's how I felt out in the woods in Tennessee when I was a kid. I would get so deep into the fantasy of the past. I would really hypnotize myself and it was kind of hard to snap out of it sometimes. I lived in the dream of the past all the time.

**Harris:** How has been working with the Virginia MOCA?

**White:** It's been really great. The institution there, the people are all wonderful, I had a crew of local artists, 10-12 people, they were all talented, enthusiastic, the museum couldn't have been nicer, they provided me with all of the resources that I needed.

**Harris:** How did you feel the reception was for the opening?

# Joshua Liner Gallery

**White:** It was wonderful. We had a traffic jam of people trying to get there. They were backed out on the freeway. It was a great reception. Couldn't ask for a better one. I love the crowds. It's so satisfying to see that a lot of people want to see what you've done, and that's your job as an artist, to reach as many people as you can, I think.

**Harris:** Does that mess with your ego?

**White:** Of course it does! I have an artist's ego! I want people to come! I want attention! All artists want attention, and if they say they don't, they're lying. Everyone wants their story told, everyone wants to be paid attention to, and everyone wants to count.

**Harris:** It definitely happens a lot nowadays with social media and it feels like there's so many opinions and so much noise.

**White:** Yeah, social media is a real mess in a way. I hope it doesn't get darker and darker. Right now, it seems to be messing with people, especially little kids. It's kind of a distortion of reality, or maybe it is the new reality, I don't know. I see a lot of dark foreboding there though.

**Harris:** Do you feel like you're addressing that in your work, or do you feel like you might address it in the future?

**White:** I can't edit in my work. You have address it somehow if you're thinking about reality because it's the new reality. I don't do it head-on. I try to not hit everything right on the head, but its in there. And every so often I will sort of reference it. And I use my paints sort of as memes on Twitter. Stuff I did years ago I will put up and it'll suddenly be relevant again as a comment upon our politics or the new ego driver social media consciousness we're all developing. Social commentary is always in my work on some level, but I try not to be obvious about it, because I don't want to be a preacher.

**Harris:** Do you ever step back from something you've done and been like, 'holy shit, that was maybe too much'?

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