

LEGU RI

FAN TO

KEEP ME

FOOL WHI

**BIG
LECTRIC
FAN TO
KEEP ME
COOL WHILE
I SLEEP**

10 September – 13 December 2009

Wayne White

Big Lectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep





THIS INSTALLATION IS A FIFTEEN FOOT SLEEPING PUPPET HEAD WITH A PEEP SHOW INSIDE ITS BRAIN AND MOVING EYES AND MOUTH. IT RESTS IN A ROOM OF SIDE-OF-THE-BARN LETTERS.

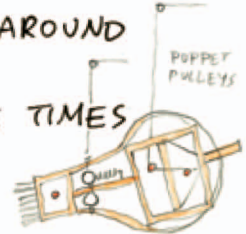


IT'S A ROADSIDE ATTRACTION, A MUSEUM RELIC OF A LOST WORLD AND A BIG, WEIRD TOY STILL IN ITS BOX.

THE HEAD IS THE GREAT ARTIST, GEORGE JONES, AS HE LOOKED IN THE FIFTIES. THE TITLE IS FROM HIS SONG, "RAGGED BUT RIGHT," IN WHICH THE SINGER BRAGS ABOUT HIS INDEPENDENT LIFE STYLE -



... A BIG ELECTRIC FAN TO KEEP ME COOL WHILE I SLEEP
 A LITTLE BABY GIRL PLAYS AROUND DADDY'S FEET
 A PORTERHOUSE STEAK THREE TIMES A DAY FOR MY BOARD...
 AND SO ON



THIS SONG WAS STUCK IN MY HEAD WHEN I VISITED HOUSTON IN JUNE. IT



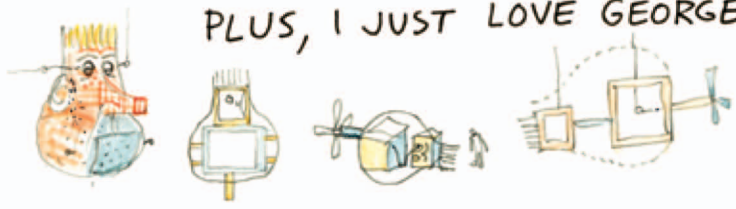
INSISTED ITSELF. I KEPT THINKING OF HOT HOUSTON NIGHTS BEFORE AIR CONDITIONING AND THE YOUNG GEORGE JONES IN THIS CITY-FULL OF CRAZY ARTISTIC PASSION AND MAKING MUSIC HISTORY. I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING ORGANIC TO HOUSTON AND THIS WAS PERFECT.



THE SLEEPING FIGURE IS ONE OF THE GREAT SUBJECTS OF ART. IT IS A POWERFUL SYMBOL OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS AND DREAMS-THE BIG ENGINES OF CREATIVITY. MY BIG PUPPET HEAD ALSO REFERENCES GOYA'S "THE SLEEP OF REASON." THE PUPPET PEEP SHOW INSIDE THE HEAD IS THE UNLEASHED DEMONS.

AN ALL-NIGHT, UNSTOPPING FAN IS THE MERCILESS AND ETERNAL CYCLE OF EVERYTHING. THE PUPPET HEAD HAS A MOVING FAN APPENDAGE WHICH MORPHS MAN AND MACHINE INTO A SURREALISTIC SYMBOL OF ANXIOUS EXISTENCE.

PLUS, I JUST LOVE GEORGE JONES.



WW
7/5/09

Foreword

When Wayne White had solo exhibitions of his paintings at Clementine Gallery in New York (2002 and 2004), mercifully I saw them in solitude so that my guffawing did not disturb other visitors. Each visit meant a slow trip around the gallery in order to appreciate how meticulously Wayne had inserted weirdly shaped letters into bucolic scenes of thrift store landscapes, thereby rendering them new and unexpected objects. The words and phrases White chose to juxtapose with the faded, sentimental images ranged from razor-sharp to bawdy, and many were hilarious. The total effect of each work was a refreshing revelation and I found myself wondering what kind of mind was behind them. When the gallery director revealed that earlier in his career Wayne White had designed sets for *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, I was intrigued. Like many others, I had been a loyal fan of the weirdly surreal universe depicted in the 1980s hit art-project-cum-children's television show. I wanted to invite Wayne to Rice Gallery, but I did not see how his art could be translated into a large-scale installation.

In June 2009, an exhibition of Wayne's word paintings and small sculptures was on view in New York at Mirielle Mosler Ltd., along with the recently released coffee-table book of Wayne's work aptly titled, *Maybe Now I'll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve*. Designed and edited by Todd Oldham, the book was a trip through the mind of Wayne White, from deft caricature drawings of people he encountered on the streets of Nashville to sketches of fantastical dreamscapes concocted for music videos and television shows. I knew Wayne was capable of something amazing, and through the generosity of Mirielle Mosler, who called him on the spot, I got in touch with Wayne. After that, it wasn't long before he traveled from Los Angeles to Rice Gallery for his site visit. I would like to thank Mirielle, as well as Cliff Benjamin and Erin Kermanikian of Western Project, Los Angeles for their assistance.

Not long after the site visit, Wayne's proposal for *Big Lectric Fan To Keep Me Cool While I Sleep* arrived in the mail. It was a small model of the gallery, its walls and floor painted with huge, one-point perspective lettering and at the center rested a giant head. A written proposal with little drawings in the margins accompanied the model, and explained poetically that the head was a likeness of the country music legend George Jones, circa 1950. The gallery staff and I knew we were in for something unusual, fun, and almost certainly a challenge to pull off.

Wayne arrived in early August and with the help of his Los Angeles based right-hand man, John Schule, started work on the installation. Thus began long hours of carving,

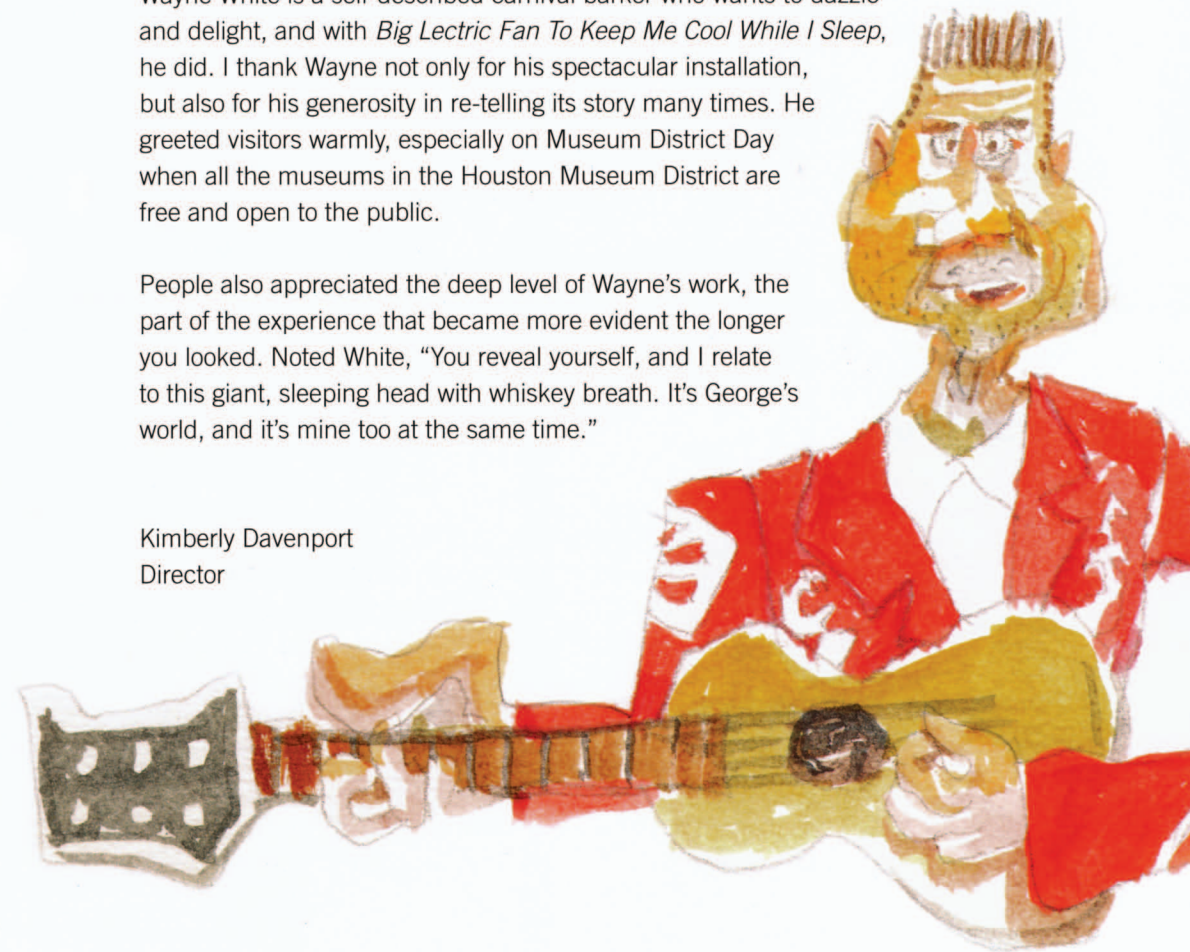
assembling, and painting that magically transformed monolithic blocks of Styrofoam into what Wayne would rightly claim to be, "the biggest George Jones head in the world." The level of craftsmanship that Wayne lavished on this temporary work of art defined the phrase "high production values." When the moving features were complete — George's opening and closing mouth, rolling eyes, and spinning fan — and the installation finished, a new spirit inhabited the gallery. Passersby did a double take. I saw visitors leave with smiles on their faces and I knew the feeling.

Some visitors claimed they were not art lovers as much as passionate fans of George Jones. Not the least of these was Rice's own Cary Wolfe, Bruce and Elizabeth Dunlevie Professor of English and world-class authority on the life and music of George Jones. Professor Wolfe's brilliant gallery talk, *George Jones: Liner Notes*, exemplified the best of what is called "interdisciplinary study." I thank him for it, and for his thoughtfulness in lending us CDs from his personal collection of George Jones music.

Wayne White is a self-described carnival barker who wants to dazzle and delight, and with *Big Lectric Fan To Keep Me Cool While I Sleep*, he did. I thank Wayne not only for his spectacular installation, but also for his generosity in re-telling its story many times. He greeted visitors warmly, especially on Museum District Day when all the museums in the Houston Museum District are free and open to the public.

People also appreciated the deep level of Wayne's work, the part of the experience that became more evident the longer you looked. Noted White, "You reveal yourself, and I relate to this giant, sleeping head with whiskey breath. It's George's world, and it's mine too at the same time."

Kimberly Davenport
Director



There's a giant disembodied head of George Jones in the middle of Rice Gallery. Created by the Tennessee-born artist Wayne White, the enormous noggin is the centerpiece of his installation *Big Lectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep* and it's really something only a Southerner like White would come up with.

George Jones is the bad boy country music icon who blended incredible talent with infamous booze-fueled antics; among them an eight-mile lawnmower ride for a drink after his wife took his car keys. White has a particularly Southern take on the performer, blending admiration with wry acknowledgement of the singer's tragic flaws. White's George Jones is essentially a massive puppet head, a caricature carved from Styrofoam, tilted on its side, passed out. Deftly painted beard stubble covers Jones' jaw while his circa-1950s flattop is crafted from cardboard tubes sprouting from the top of his head. His bloodshot eyes slowly roll in his head and when you pull a nearby rope, his jaw opens, wafting booze and triggering a recorded snore.

The exhibition title *Big Lectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep* was taken from the lyrics of Jones' song "I'm Ragged But I'm Right." According to White, the song was playing in his head when he visited Houston last summer. He kept imagining Jones in the city as a young man in those years before air conditioning — "full of crazy artistic passion and making music history."

White conveys that humid restlessness via a peephole in the back of Jones' head. The viewer can peer into the unquiet inner workings of George's brain where a little jointed puppet in a rhinestone studded suit dances continuously in the flickering lights of a wooden stage while the sun endlessly rises and sets behind him. Meanwhile, in an effort to conjure a cooling breeze, White turned a small side gallery into an "ice house," pun intended. The walls are painted in a rustic, blue-tinged *faux bois* while a cartoony Styrofoam "ice sculpture" rests in the center and little Styrofoam icicles collect on the walls.

White painted the text of the title on the walls and floors of the gallery in giant, 3-D billboard-style letters. It's a device he uses in his thrift store paintings, cheesy mass-produced landscape paintings the artist alters by painting over them with amusing or absurd phrases and words like "Failed Abstract Paintings Seventies" or "Tinted Lard."

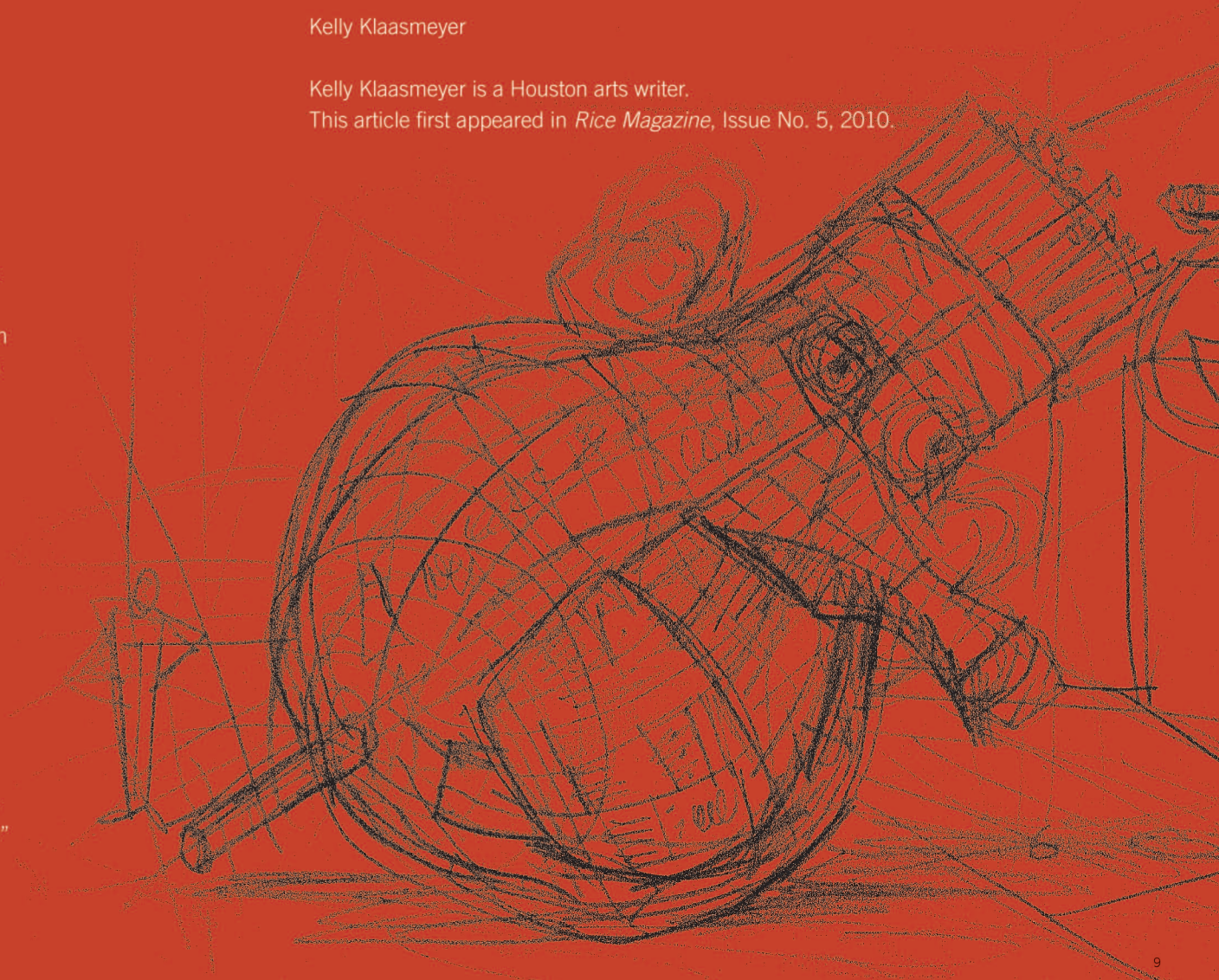
While the text is crisply executed, the sculptural elements of the installation are especially impressive — with good reason, White's a pro. In addition to his fine art career, he's renown for his Emmy Award-winning work on the sets and puppets of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* as well as for his art direction on Peter Gabriel's classic stop-motion animation-filled music video for "Big Time."

George Jones hasn't seen the show he inspired but I bet he'd like *Big Lectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep*. Word is he called White to thank him. Jones is currently on tour and will be performing in Houston the day before White's show closes. Maybe he'll stop by to check himself out. Maybe he'll even yank the rope and inhale that cloud of whisky for old times' sake - Jones is clean and sober now.

Kelly Klaasmeyer

Kelly Klaasmeyer is a Houston arts writer.

This article first appeared in *Rice Magazine*, Issue No. 5, 2010.



Wayne White Gets Heady with His Latest Sculpture

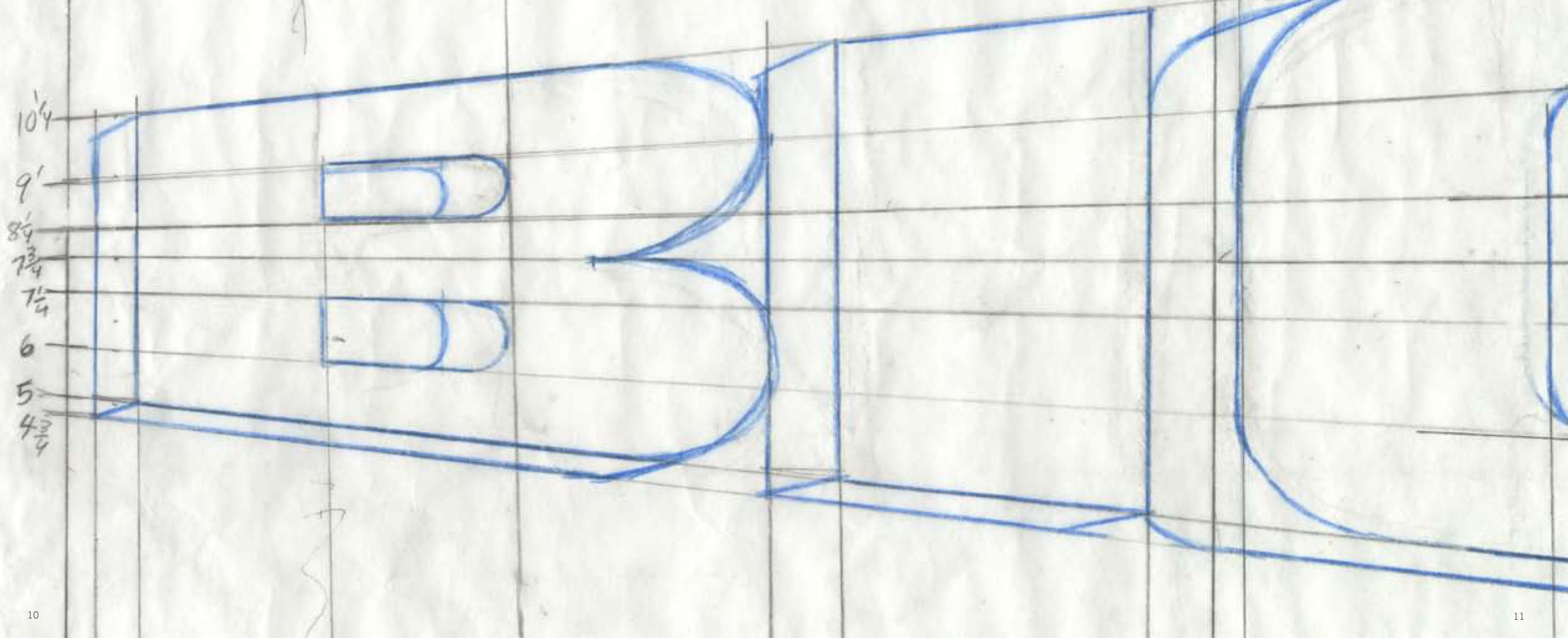
By Andrew Dansby

Wayne White arrived in Houston and dreamed about George Jones dreaming. The artist, a Tennessean by birth and Los Angeleno by residence, had been invited to create any work he pleased in the Rice Gallery, a space devoted to site-specific installation art. Between the locale and the heat, his mind was drawn to Jones' song "I'm Ragged But I'm Right," with its lyric, "a big electric fan to keep me cool while I sleep."

"Instead of reflection and meditation, I kept hearing that song," White says, "so I thought, 'Why fight it?'"

White describes his plan to me the day before he starts work. It is going to be a large George Jones head — "with the flat top," he quickly adds — on its side. Inside Jones' forehead will be a peep show with puppets. His mouth will open by means of a rope and pulley, and his eyes will roll from awake to asleep. A fan will be at the base of his neck, true to the lyric. "He'll be asleep," White says, "but it's a fitful sleep. It's a sleep of reason. Though I guess that can produce monsters. Then there's a circle-of-life thing with the fan."

White smiles. "All that's my deep art part."





Big Electric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep is a large undertaking even by White's standards. It threads together various elements of his varied and storied career.

Even those who don't know about White have likely stumbled across his work. White was the visionary behind Peter Gabriel's "Big Time" and Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight" videos, two memorable pieces in a genre prone to forgettable lip-synced pastiche. He was also a puppet and set designer, puppeteer, and voice for *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. Talking about the show, he'll sometimes drop into character, serving up Dirty Dog's growling voice. He also shares Dirty Dog's eyes, lively blue but lined and sleepy. These days, the 52-year-old also looks a bit like Cool Cat, his face surrounded by black plastic-frame glasses, an admirable crop of hair and a bushy beard he grew at the request of Steven Berkman, a well-known photographer friend who wants to shoot White looking like somebody from the late 1800s.

More recently, White has been creating instantly recognizable landscapes. He buys mass-produced framed mid-century landscapes from thrift stores and paints big, often humorous, block-letter words or phrases — many from his youth in Tennessee — on top, often in pastels.

Despite the disparate media, White's work has a continuity. It's a fidgety fusion of Americana and avant-garde, bracingly visual yet language-obsessed. It can take something blandly comforting like a landscape by Lorenz Griffith or Paul Detlefsen and make it jarring with a phrase such as "Drop the Country Boy Act" or "I'm Lost on a Spaceship, Mama," letters that so greatly contrast the context that they seem like UFOs landing on a covered bridge. If these pieces carry the weight of punch lines, that's intentional. White's dry sense of humor is usually present, it just doesn't come with a laugh track.

These recent paintings have earned White significant attention. He says one of the first breaks for what he calls his "word paintings" came in 2000 when one graced the cover of *Nixon*, an album by Lambchop, a soulful chamber country ensemble from Nashville. White had met Lambchop's Kurt Wagner in the mid-1980s, and they remain friends. Wagner had used a White painting for an album cover before and decided he wanted a word painting for his next project. He asked White which slogans he'd used lately.

"When he got round to *Nixon*, I knew immediately that it was the one," Wagner says. "Our record was full of references and influences that came from the great soul music from that period of time during Nixon's administration and that plus a connection to Wayne seemed like enough to me."





Wagner also used White's word paintings on subsequent albums.

He describes "Wayne's inner universe" as being "as true to the core of what it takes to be an artist as I've seen."

White was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, but grew up in a woodsy setting in Hixon. His father was a former athlete and a mechanical type, which might explain a lot about White. An affinity for the math and craft of carpentry is apparent in the construction of Jones' head. But a rebellious kid might choose art over sport.

White attended Middle Tennessee State University and moved to New York, primarily to meet graphic novelist Art Spiegelman (*Maus*), whom he tracked down at the School of Visual Arts.

In New York, White was able to study Spiegelman's work and also found a culture of like-minded artists, including his future wife, Mimi Pond, a highly-regarded writer and cartoonist whose myriad credits include the script for the first episode of *The Simpsons*. A puppet show White did called *Jerry Lee/Jimmy Lee*, about Jerry Lee Lewis and Jimmy Swaggart, helped him land the job on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. He points out that Pee Wee Herman creator and actor Paul Reubens was already a big-screen star by the time he got his own TV show. That Reubens was able to recruit

a bunch of New York artists to bring his show to life, rather than doing it on a Los Angeles sound stage, offered a rare creative freedom.

White and Pond now live in Los Angeles with their two children, but he's attained sufficient renown to avoid work he doesn't want to do.

"I've always been lucky enough to meet people with some power who let me do what I want to do," he says, mentioning Reubens. "He'd set us loose in a room, no rules." White calls Peter Gabriel "a great boss."

"An artist needs those kinds of connections to survive," he adds. "And you don't meet guys like that in Hixon."

White grew up not far from the country-music hub of Nashville, but says he developed a greater appreciation for Jones' music through a friend he met in New York.

In addition to his local ties, Saratoga-born Jones was a natural choice for an installation, White points out, because his mug has strong features: the curved nose and tight eyes that earned the singer the nickname the Possum. White has drawn Jones before, but the scale has changed.

"I'm reaching back," he says. "It's good to get back to the puppet thing. I like putting on a show. I'm an entertainer. I like being the carnival barker."

White's Jones head will be unveiled on September 10. It will remain on display until December 13, at which point it will be dismantled and not rebuilt, which is the fate that meets all projects at Rice Gallery.

White shrugs. "I don't get attached," he says. "I really prefer to move on. I don't like to covet stuff I make."

Renowned artist, designer and fashion icon Todd Oldham, a fan of White, recently assembled three-plus decades of White's work — word paintings, photos of puppets and sculptures, sketches, doodles, and more — and published them in a lavish book titled *Wayne White: Maybe Now I'll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve*, which has earned coverage in such magazines as *Esquire* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

White doesn't mind the retrospective, even though it looks back. "It's different," he says. "It feels like a big thumbs up."

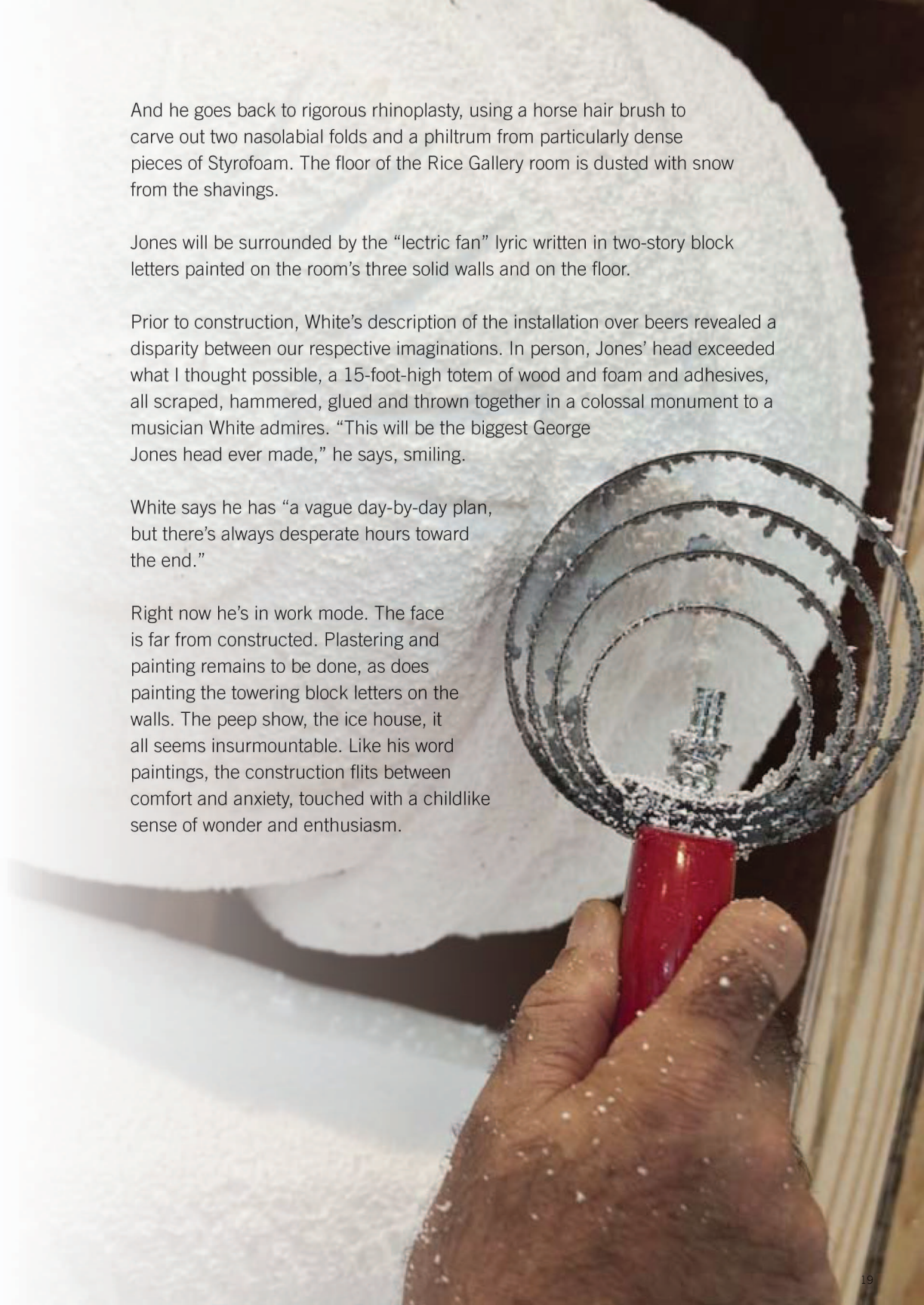
And he goes back to rigorous rhinoplasty, using a horse hair brush to carve out two nasolabial folds and a philtrum from particularly dense pieces of Styrofoam. The floor of the Rice Gallery room is dusted with snow from the shavings.

Jones will be surrounded by the "lectric fan" lyric written in two-story block letters painted on the room's three solid walls and on the floor.

Prior to construction, White's description of the installation over beers revealed a disparity between our respective imaginations. In person, Jones' head exceeded what I thought possible, a 15-foot-high totem of wood and foam and adhesives, all scraped, hammered, glued and thrown together in a colossal monument to a musician White admires. "This will be the biggest George Jones head ever made," he says, smiling.

White says he has "a vague day-by-day plan, but there's always desperate hours toward the end."

Right now he's in work mode. The face is far from constructed. Plastering and painting remains to be done, as does painting the towering block letters on the walls. The peep show, the ice house, it all seems insurmountable. Like his word paintings, the construction flits between comfort and anxiety, touched with a childlike sense of wonder and enthusiasm.





When Letric's George is complete, it seems like it will have a similar feel as White's paintings, the whole UFO-perched-by-a-babbling-brook effect of taking what is known and making it different. Weird is a word that gets used a lot with White's work, but it's a little cheap. The art is panoramic, familiar but strange, funny and a little sad. Were there a word for it, that word might end up painted in big block letters on a landscape wrapped around a tree or creeping around the back of a barn.

Andrew Dansby is an Entertainment Columnist for the *Houston Chronicle*. This article first appeared in the *Houston Chronicle's* "Zest" section, August 30, 2009.

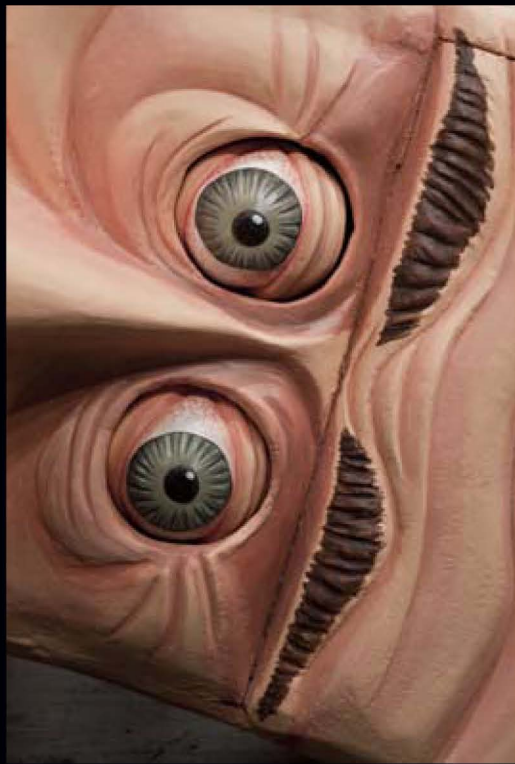
















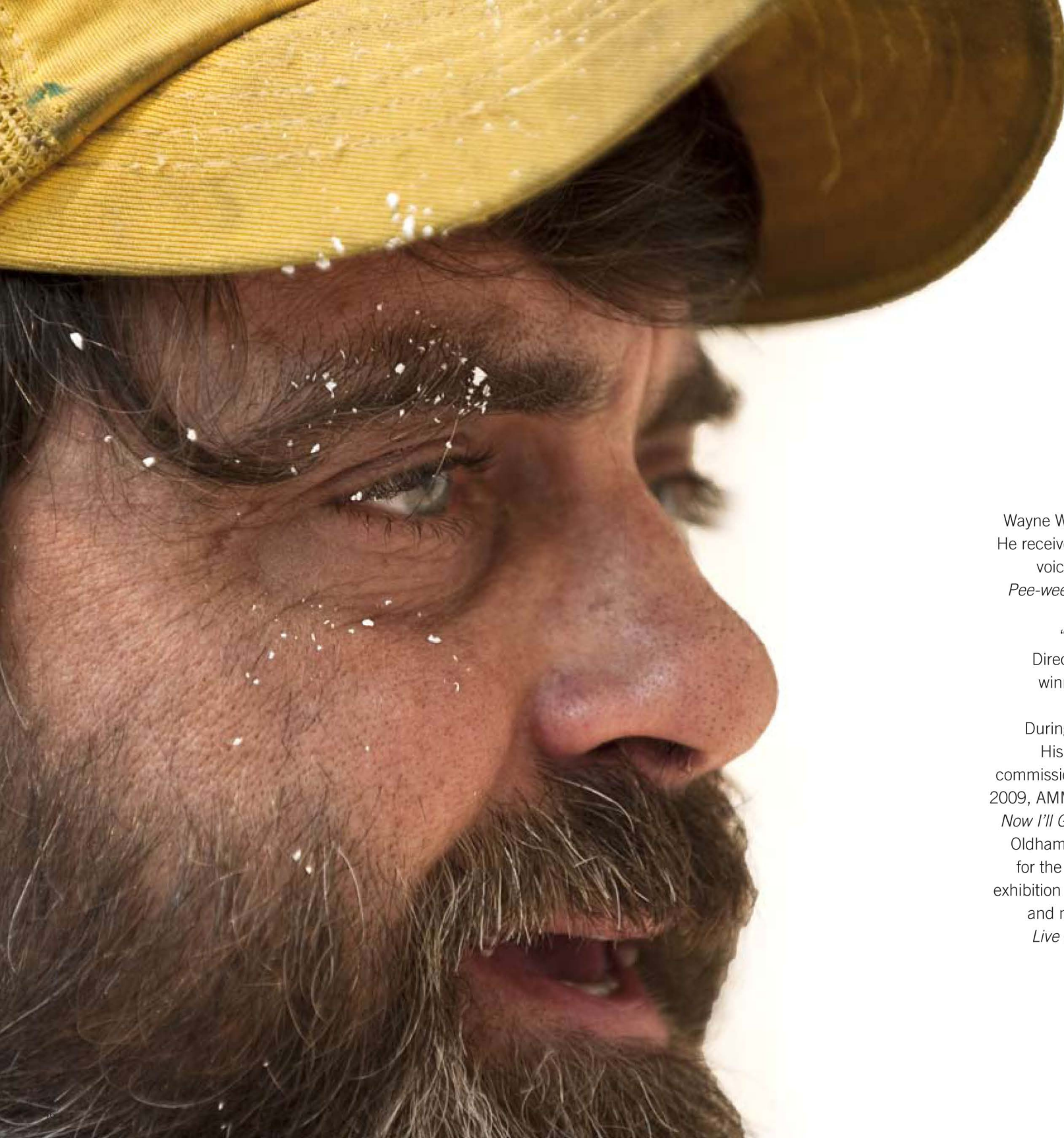






LECTRIC

HA



About the Artist

Wayne White is an artist, art director, puppeteer, cartoonist, and illustrator. He received a BFA from Middle Tennessee State University. In 1986, White voiced and performed many of the puppets on the television program *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, winning three Emmy Awards for his set and puppet designs. He did art direction on two music videos, Peter Gabriel's "Big Time" (1986) for which he won a Billboard award for best Art Direction in a music video, and he designed all the sets for the award-winning video "Tonight, Tonight" (1996) for the Smashing Pumpkins.

During the past eight years, White has built a reputation as a fine artist. His large-scale text sculpture *Yer Supposed to Act All Impressed* was commissioned for Rockefeller Plaza, New York as part of *Art Rock 2006*. In 2009, AMMO Books published a book about his work, *Wayne White: Maybe Now I'll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve*, designed and edited by Todd Oldham. For Art Basel Miami 2009, White created an outdoor installation for the The Wolfsonian-Florida International University as part of a group exhibition curated by Todd Oldham. In 2010, White designed a new puppet and merchandise for live performances of the *Pee Wee Herman Show: Live on Stage*. Wayne White lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

Wayne White, *Big Lectric Fan To Keep Me Cool While I Sleep*
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
10 September – 13 December 2009

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University,
6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

Rice Gallery exhibitions and programs receive major support from Rice Gallery Patrons and
Members, The Brown Foundation, Inc., and the Kilgore Endowment. Exhibition catalogues are
funded in part by the Robert J. Card, M.D. and Karol Kreymer Catalogue Endowment.
The gallery receives partial operating support from the City of Houston. KUHF-FM and
Saint Arnold Brewing Company provide in-kind support.

Rice Gallery thanks the following:

Mireille Mosler Ltd., New York, New York
Western Project, Culver City, California
Todd Oldham and AMMO Books, Los Angeles
Ramiro Rea, Alvaro J. Rodriguez, Jose Juan Rodriguez, and Rodrigo Rodriguez, Rice University

Wayne White thanks Cliff Benjamin, Mireille Mosler, Mimi Pond, and John Schlue.

Photographs by Nash Baker

Copyright © 2009 nashbaker.com:

Pages 2, 12-13, 15, 16-17, 19, 20-21, 22-23, 24, 25, 26-27, 28-29, 30 (top), 31, 32-33,
34-35, 36, 37, 38-39, 40, 41, 42-43, 44-45, 46

Photographs by Rice Gallery Staff

Copyright © 2009 Rice University Art Gallery:

Page 30 (bottom)

Preparatory drawings and sketches by Wayne White:

Pages 1, 4-5, 7, 8-9, 10-11

Rice University Art Gallery Staff

Kimberly Davenport, Director

Jaye Anderton, Manager

Joshua Fischer, Assistant Curator

Anna Foret, Outreach Coordinator

David Krueger, Preparator

Kaylen Nique, Membership Coordinator

Design: Antonio Manega, Gazer Design Group

Printing: Masterpiece Litho, Houston, Texas

Copyright © 2010 Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas

ISBN: 1-932281-37-1

Rice Gallery

