

A Smile on the Wall: Airbrushed Acrylic Paintings by John Booth

Written by Mike Schulz

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Painter John M. Booth, referencing one of his artworks, says, "Hopefully, it'll put a smile on somebody's wall." The odds are pretty good that it will - in his airbrushed acrylic paintings, there's a *lot* of smiling going on.

In Booth's *Fishin*, an enormous red fish grins dementedly as he prepared to devour a small black cat. In *Tada*, a similar fish - emerald green this time - is balanced on top of a cat, who, in turn, stands upon a dog; their smiles indicate great pride at the feat. (Tada
!) In

Good Coffee

, a balding, middle-aged man looks frighteningly giddy about taking his first sip.

And throughout Booth's works, many of which can be seen at (<http://www.masongraphics.net>) and at Riverssance this weekend, his figures - human and animal, smiling and unsmiling alike - are painted in bold, vivid colors, a vibrant array of reds, blues, greens, and purples.

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"And they look a lot better in person than they do on that computer screen," Booth says with a laugh.

Past directors of the Riverssance festival agreed. Booth, who is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with his wife, and fellow artist, Holly Sue Foss (whose works in silkscreening will also be displayed at this year's festival), had one of his paintings chosen as the design for the 2001 Riverssance T-shirt.

Featuring an image of a suited man with a saucer for a head standing in the foreground as fish rained down behind him, the artwork was described by current jury director Jodean Murdock as having "a Magritte feel," yet Booth says that he's been influenced less by artists of the past than by the art of animation.

A collector of early-animation cels of the Betty Boop era, Booth admits to wanting to work in animation from a young age, but he was hesitant about the time commitment required for a film, versus an individual artwork. "With the time it takes to do an animated movie," he says, "I knew I could get a lot more done *this way*."

Booth's father, though, worried about the job opportunities available for someone interested in the arts. "My father short of pushed me into engineering," Booth says, and he indeed pursued engineering at the University of Minnesota, but making a career in the field was not to Booth's liking. "I thought there'd be more *creativity* in engineering," he says. "I just wanted to use my imagination."

That he has. Although many of Booth's cartoon-like paintings are graced by animals - "I grew up on a farm," he says, "so there were always lots of animals around" - the acrylic works in Booth's 22-year career are nothing if not imaginative, be it Booth's literal interpretation of a *Hot Head*, the nursery-rhyme imagining of

Hey Diddle Diddle

, or the cheeky

You're Great Honey

, featuring a delicate flower lying in bed next to an insect ... who's contentedly smoking a cigarette.

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Booth displays his works at more than two dozen art festivals annually - he lists, "I've been to Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Maryland, Alabama ... " - and despite his success, he does have a caveat. "Unfortunately, I don't win a lot of awards," he laughs. "Fine art generally needs to be more esoteric."

With what he sees as a proliferation of arts festivals in recent years, Booth says that the art world "is a very tough business right now. The economy is a little soft, and we've really been struggling in the last year-and-a-half." So in addition to his acrylics, Booth has been expanding his reach into other *fields* of art; he is currently working on a screenplay set in the art community, and recently completed work on a DVD documentary short, "where I asked about 100 people the question: 'What *is* art?' I'm hoping to get it screened" at Riverssance.

So, John ... what *is* art?

"Oh, wow," he laughs, before taking a moment to reveal his brief, elegant answer: "It's whatever somebody makes from their heart."

Samplings of John M. Booth's air-brushed acrylics can be found at (<http://www.masongraphics.net>).