

Our culture, whether it somehow seeps down into our very bones or it becomes embedded in us at birth, is hard to break from. It's an integral part of our beings in ways that we can't always express. Even when we are removed from the South, it finds a way to make itself known in our lives.

Brooks Frederick's art has taken him away from his native Houma, but it also brought him back home in ways he probably couldn't have guessed. In 2000, Brooks moved to New York to study figurative painting. He was trained in traditional techniques. He reconnects with his culture through his paintings in a way that might not have occurred if he had just stayed close to home. Living in New York has provided Brooks with a fresh perspective of our way of life. It led him to be inspired by everyday Louisiana—from oil spills to one of the most iconic symbols of Mardi Gras. It's left an indelible mark on his canvas. It's his home.

"It's part of me, you know? It's home in a way that New York never has been," Brooks says.

MARDI GRAS NURSERY

Though the Big Apple is his current home, Brooks has made his way down south to do two separate shows in New Orleans. One is a solo show, taking place at Barrister's Gallery, that started in January and will run until Feb. 2, and features about 27 king cake baby paintings. The other is a group Mardi Gras exhibition at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts that will run through Feb. 23. Both of these shows feature Brooks' *King Cake Babies*.

"It started about four years ago; I was living, for the summer, in New Orleans," Brooks says. "And I was doing still-life paintings at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Art. And I had been looking for something that spoke to the culture that I grew up in, something that would be more personal than just fruit. And I had the idea to do a king cake baby. And another part of it is that I don't live in Houma or New Orleans for most of the year, so [the] king cake baby becomes a way for me to connect with my culture."

This idea started simply enough—Brooks took advantage of his formal training as a figurative painter to paint the tiny plastic babies. Most of his paintings are done by observation—a close study—even using a magnifying glass at times. He is mindful of the way light performs on the babies, their wisps of plastic hair, their occasionally angry expressions. The babies started off very straightforward, some featuring different races of babies holding hands, which ended up playing into the conception of the works.

"I guess the series started because I found these in New Orleans, and, in a city that's predominantly African-American, I thought it was interesting that there were only white king cake babies or pink king cake babies," Brooks says.

KING CAKE

The babies became a platform for him to discuss different issues, different viewpoints and stances regarding race, equality, gender, politics and even environmental issues. Brooks even has a series of paintings done in oil he collected from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, including one of a king cake baby.

"It becomes a way for me to address those issues and also keep it kind of light," Brooks says. "I like my work to open up a dialogue, start a conversation. I'm not going at it with a certain viewpoint, you know? I'm just trying to engage people with some of the things I think are interesting."

PRESERVED IN PLASTIC

Obviously, Brooks covers a lot of political issues. But that's not his exclusive subject. He says they oscillate between the humorous and the serious, though sometimes that line is blurred. As serious as a king cake



BALE



baby is painted with washed-up oil, Brooks also has a painting of a giant baby attacking his parents' neighborhood in Houma. It's a bit of whimsy and a play on the serious expression of the baby.

The project evolved over time, and Brooks got more experimental. The babies changed their locations. The scale of the babies was altered—giant babies and tiny babies and baby-sized babies. It's all about getting his audience to take a closer look, to observe surroundings a little more closely, to share his own perspective. There were a few constants, however.

"I find it very interesting to have a limitation—I've been planning these works for about four years, and I set up some rules for myself, like the only thing I change is [the babies'] environment," Brooks says. "I don't make them move or change their color or their appearance; I just paint them like I see them."



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WARNING: MAY CAUSE KATSARIDAPHOBIA

One painting with a *very* interesting environment is one of Brooks' most striking works, though it's not for the faint of heart ... or those with katsaridaphobia—a fear of roaches. It features a king cake baby and a roach face to face. The formal training he received in New York also came into this



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piece—Brooks had a dead roach (and a plastic one, for moral support) in his studio while he painted this piece to help him while he painted. But there's a lot more to it than just an interesting image with an even more interesting story. Like any of Brooks' works, this is open to interpretation. But he has his own take on it.

"For me, it's a self-portrait," Brooks says. "The roach represents a personification of my fears and self-doubts as an artist or a person or anything. And, then, I'm the king cake baby confronting it, confronting my fears. Roaches are synonymous with New York and New Orleans, both places that I spend my time."

So the roach provided a tie to two of the most influential cities in

Brooks' life while creating a very unique message. He sees himself reflected in his work in some ways with the connection to Mardi Gras. And there's something a little more subtle connecting him—the baby itself. We all had to start somewhere, didn't we?

"Another reason I do this is because I think people can relate to babies, or there's that possibility there ... I think, in a larger sense, you can see the humanity in a baby, where you can't always see the humanity in an adult," Brooks says. "We're biologically wired to interact with babies and reach out to babies."

ART OF DISCOVERY

If we're hardwired to interact with babies, Brooks hopes that the same reasoning can be used with his paintings. We can feel a similar connection. He wants his audience to visually interact with his work, to study it, and hopefully understand it. It's about creating something that's more than just visually pleasing.

Brooks' work is about finding the beauty in the mundane and discovering the light in everyday life, something he's practiced since his mother put canvases in front of him at the age of 2. Brooks hasn't stopped observing since. His perspective is both of an insider and an outsider, and that makes his work truly unique.

"People inspire me," Brooks says. "I like people; I like interacting with people. I like getting to know people, spend time with them. Whether it's a plastic baby or a real person, I just like getting to really investigate the subject and really spend time with the subject in an almost meditative state—where you look at something longer than a glance. That's what's exciting to me about painting and art—the sense of discovery that can take place." **POV**



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