

Wayne White at Rice Gallery

by Bill Davenport
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After seeing Wayne White's *Big Lectric Fan to Keep Me Cool While I Sleep* at Rice Gallery, I ran right out to Alamo Thrift in Pasadena. I found myself fingering a clunky jig-sawed plaque: a duck wearing Laura Ingalls' sunbonnet that says "Home Sweet Home." Not that White's piece is that aesthetic; it's more Cartoon Network than Kuntry Kamp, but White's lighthearted evocation of countrified clichés got me thinking.

It's an enjoyable show: a giant puppet head like an overturned whiskey bottle lies in a stupor, bloodshot eyes popping open with faintly audible creaking sounds as if the figure (based on the flat-topped country singer George Jones) was having a recurring nightmare every fifteen seconds. Through a dim peephole we can see inside George's big 'ol head, where a lonely marionette tap dances on a rickety stage. Out front there's a convenient rope: give it a haul and George's gate-like mouth hinges open to emit an enormous snore and a blast of whisky-scented breath. An animated interactive playground, it's like putting shaving cream into your buddy's sleeping palm. Fun, but all too easy.

The last set of giant talking puppets at Rice was David Ellis' *Conversation* (2006). Like *Big Lectric Fan*, *Conversation* was a tableau: a stilled slice of storytelling, like a scene cut from the middle of a longer movie. Ellis' giant talking squirrel-men were part of a sci-fi cult film; White's puppet head is a Saturday-morning cartoon with enough sly irony to make it enjoyable for the grown-ups, too. Despite his alcoholic daze, White's fictionalized George Jones is essentially wholesome. His disturbing dreams are not disturbing us. We look at his stylized stupor from a distance, with amused sympathy.

The ironic distance White inserts into everything he does is appealing: deflating and digesting received imagery is part of growing up. Satire helps define and reinforce cultural boundaries: this is the kind of thing we're painting now, that is the kind of thing we are painting over. We can share a collective Eeeewww! over George Jones' alcoholic cowboy image, or the sentimental landscape prints White co-opts in his many text-over thrift-store paintings, and be reassured of our superior taste and hipness.

As befits a professional, White's big puppet is fashioned with just the right level of care: haphazard slathers of joint compound at the unimportant seams, spotted with dabs of gray paint that admirably suggest beard stubble; lovingly precise detail on the bloodshot eyeballs. And no wonder: despite the slew of text-on-thriftstore paintings that White has shown in galleries, his claim to fame is his Emmy-winning work on sets and characters featured in the 1986 TV show *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, still affectionately remembered in the art world.

Like many artists commissioned to create work for Rice Gallery, White struggles to make an object into an installation, filling the room with barn-sized retro-gothic letters borrowed from his two-dimensional work. They effectively claim the walls and floor as part of the exhibition, but simply re-iterate the show's title, making them, in essence, a giant wall tag. The ice-box room, off to the right, adds unnecessarily literal detail to the story told by the big head: a better-than-average iceberg sculpted from white Styrofoam stands in a moody blue barn; cartoon hands hold fans, as if to circulate cool air from the icebox into the gallery.

I'm a fan of *Big Lectric Fan*. Well-crafted and fun, I enjoyed working the puppet's mouth while making up imaginary Wizard-of-Oz-style dialog. ("GO AWAY!" roars the sleeping giant.) I enjoyed peeping into his dimly lit brain. I admired the wood-grained walls and the crisp billboard lettering but, like George, I'm going to be able to sleep it off by tomorrow morning.

Wayne White

BIG LECTRIC FAN TO KEEP ME COOL WHILE I SLEEP

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Rice Gallery, Houston

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