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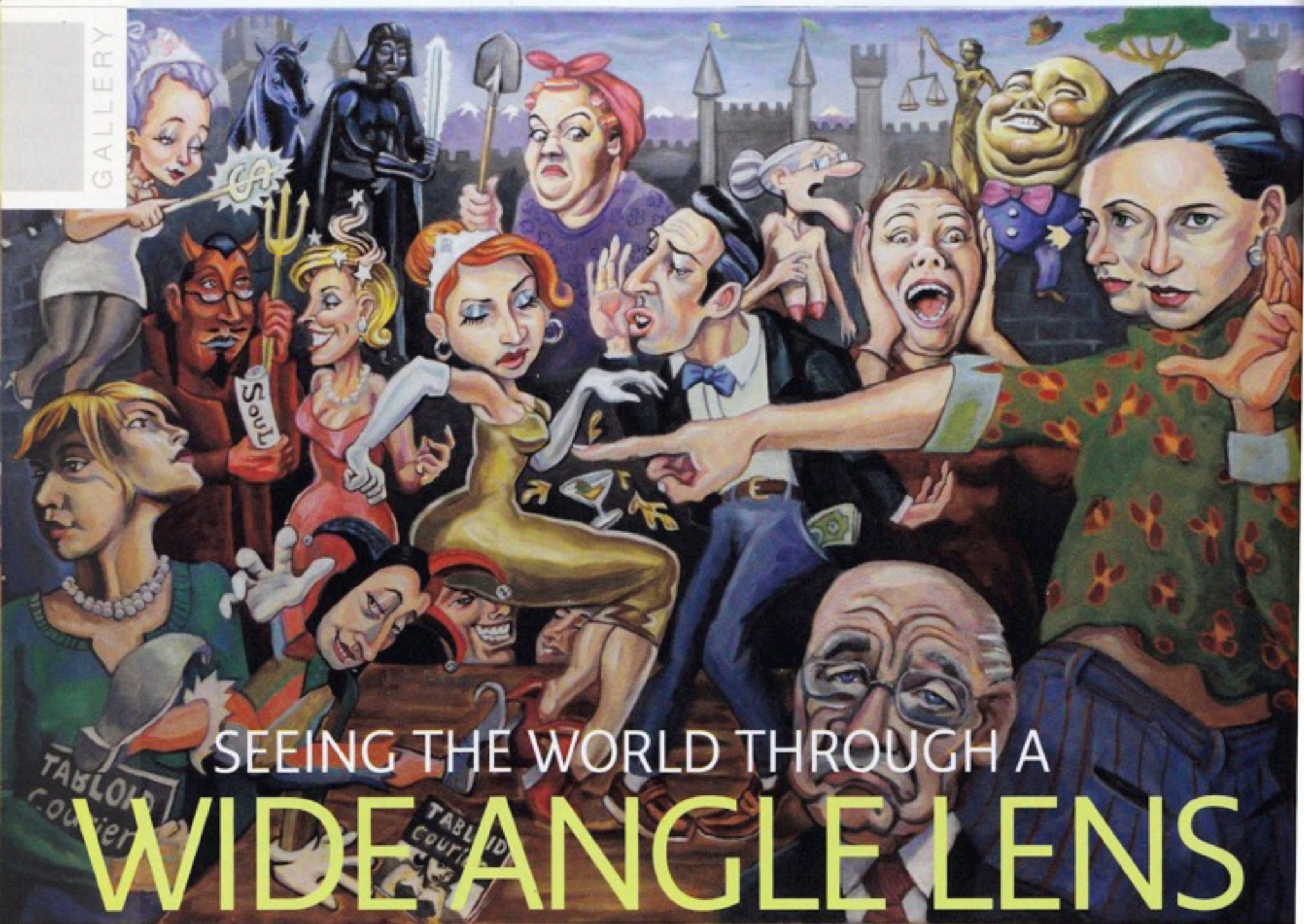
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SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH A

WIDE ANGLE LENS

JUSTIN FORBES

by Simonette Berry

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Standing in front of a Justin Forbes painting can create a vivid sensation of déjà vu. Like Edward Hopper, Forbes strikes the American subconscious on an intrinsic level; often viewers comment that they feel like they know the characters or places in Forbes's paintings when they've never seen them before. Figures, landscapes, and still lifes from the artist's daily life and imagination are collaged and sent through Forbes's wide-angle lens of pop culture nostalgia. The result is a genuine, stylized personal mythology that, in the artist's words, "both appeals to the side of us that becomes teary-eyed and giddy with the teen-aged thrill of something new and leaves us haunted by the childhood psychodrama of something old." Definitive shadows, dramatic lighting, and bright color saturate Forbes's richly painted world, where reality seems to ripple and flow over the canvas like a Hipstamatic Van Gogh.



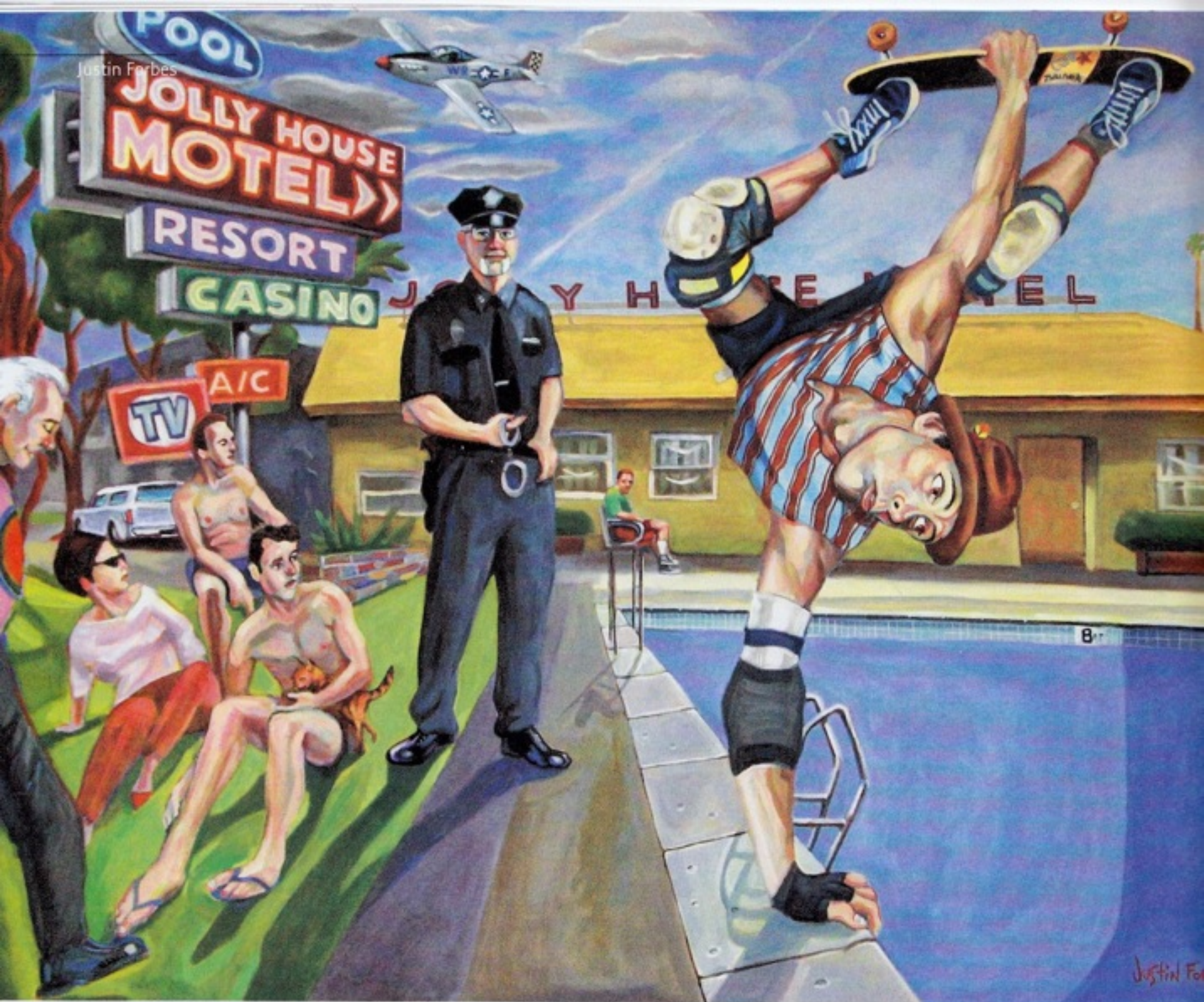
Forbes's work has been exhibited in New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans, and featured in *Juxtapoz Magazine*, *ART PAPERS*, *Tribe Magazine*, *Twisted South*, *Hustler Magazine*, and the HBO series *Tremé*. His work is also a part of numerous public and private collections, including the permanent collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the Michael Brown and Linda Green Collection, and that of actress Sela Ward, TV commercial producer T.G. Herrington, publishing magnate Larry Flynt, and Debora and Paul Lipman.

Forbes was born in Los Angeles to a professional photographer and a professional ballet and comedic dancer. He grew up surrounded by his parents' friends, a colorful cast of artists, musicians, actors, dancers, and writers. When his parents discovered he could draw, they encouraged his talents and staged mini "gallery openings" during parties at their home. At 17, he went to junior college in Santa Cruz and landed a prestigious job as an artist with Santa Cruz Skateboards. His first major mentor was his boss, Jim Phillips, an infamous artist in the skateboarding world. "It was pretty exciting. I was this teenager and already my work was being printed all over the world," he says.

Forbes moved to New York after a few years, enrolled in the School of Visual Arts, and landed a classic warehouse apartment near the old Flatiron Building. "It was really an artist's dream come true," he says. "I worked at a textile place in the Empire State Building designing surf wear—board shorts, tees, button-down patterns, that kind of thing. My office was on the 53rd floor and had a great view of the city. It was pretty

trippy, a great time in my life," he says. Forbes started visiting museums and seeing firsthand the work he'd only seen before in books. He immediately gravitated towards Van Gogh and Francis Bacon. "Through Van Gogh, I learned how to draw with paint. Then, I discovered Alice Neel's work in a gallery and... man, they couldn't get me to leave. I felt an immediate kinship to her work. They finally said, 'If we let you sit in the back room with three originals for 15 minutes, will you leave?' And I did. I sat back there and I was in heaven. It was great," he chuckles. Neel's influence on Forbes's work is still apparent today in his bright patches of color and outlined figures. "I was inspired by her process, how she starts all her figures with beautiful cobalt blue outlines and then works wet on wet to fill them in. She's so immediate with her colors."

While in New York, Forbes began selling his work regularly. Painting was a way for him to document his life, and it was heavily influenced by New York life and other artists he became acquainted with. After several years in the Big Apple, a fellow artist convinced Forbes to move down to New Orleans. "I had been there before and fallen in love with it, but living there was a whole new experience," he says. Forbes moved into a studio in the Marigny with a photographer, a sculptor, and a writer, and the artistic energy of the city immediately swept him away. "New Orleans is a city where you can recreate yourself. Everyone there seemed to be forging their own path. There was so much to talk about, so much to explore. My roommates and I started putting out a little newspaper—*The New Orleans Free Press*. I was documenting the people I met and the



places I went more than ever before. I took a camera with me everywhere and painted from the photographs at the end of the day," he says. Soon, he landed a spot in the Underexposed exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in New Orleans, and a spread in *Juxtapoz Magazine*, both major catalysts that launched his art into the local and national spotlight.

When Forbes lived in New Orleans, his style progressed as he started playing more with his underpaintings. "You know how most people do them in umbers and ochres? Well, because of my background in photography, I got the idea to make a kind of photo negative of the piece under the image comprised of complementary colors. I've done it ever since. It gives my paintings more color and allows me to not outline so much by letting some of the underlying color describe the form," he says.

"I spent most of my life in New Orleans. It is still an inspiration to me," Forbes says. Forbes was exhibiting regularly and teaching art at a local elementary school when Hurricane Katrina hit. He evacuated to Houston with only a backpack and lost everything else in the storm. Katrina marked a major shift in Forbes's life and art; he underwent a deep psychic change as he built a new life in Denton, Texas. "I miss New Orleans, but I'm happy to be alive and close to my friends and family. Life has slowed down, and it's good. I made some much-needed changes. Sometimes when I go outside at night, though, I can almost hear the calliope playing in the distance," he says. This expression of nostalgic serenity plays a large role in his post-Katrina work, which celebrates the past and present simultaneously.

Last year marked Forbes's first return to New Orleans since the storm for a solo show at Jonathan Ferrara Gallery titled *Halcyon Days*. Now, he is working on a new series tentatively titled *Blessing in Da'Skies*, a riff on his post-Katrina transformation. It will premier in October during Jonathan Ferrara's Art For Art's Sake exhibition. Forbes's new work deals with themes of innocence, honesty, imagination, playfulness, dreams, and a childlike sense of wonder. He draws inspiration from snapshots of children playing and interacting with the world. Forbes is dealing primarily with children because he says, in many ways, his new lease on life has allowed him to feel like a child again, seeing the world with new eyes. His new favorite artist is Eric Fischl, whose sun-splashed figures and loose brushwork inspire him. "I look at his work every day. He has an intuitive sense of color, almost a sixth sense. He's like my new higher power," he laughs. "His work is inspiring me to play with the dynamic tension between looseness and outlines. Picasso went from realism to abstract, but I'm kind of doing the opposite. I'm working from realism and going into a different realm." ♦