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Twisted South, Vol. 1 No. 3., Spring 2011

TWISTED SOUTH

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Vol. 1 No. 3
Spring 2011

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SOUTHERN_SCENES



THE VIVID ART

John Coltrane

Waiting for the Ball to Drop



JUSTIN OF FORBES

BY T. WAYNE WATERS

A LOST SOULS KIND OF PLACE WHERE YOU'LL EITHER HAVE THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE OR GET YOUR ASS KICKED. HARD.



J.D. Holeman

It's an odd place I've stumbled across. A backwoods bar? A low-rent strip joint? A greasy spoon way back in the swamps? There is a colorful cast of characters here, whatever it is. The red-nosed, red-shirted hipster closest to me looks away from the newspaper he's holding up and directly at me, silently demanding my attention. He looks like he might be on the downside of drunk, though he's got a coffee cup by his elbow on the table. Maybe his hooded eyes, low-hanging lower lip, and rosy nose are testaments to a head cold. A half-smoked cigarette with a precarious ash rests between two preternaturally long, slim fingers. Only after studying his intriguing countenance for a moment does the flat green expanse of a ping pong table behind him catch my eye, sitting where I'd expect to find a pool table in a joint like this. Beside it two slender, scantily clad women dance together, their sweat-glistened bodies swaying to a tune being squeezed out of accordions by two guys at the far side of the game table. I hear zydeco. Gradually, I take in the other people here. Two guys play ping pong with orange-

padded paddles. A black couple sits at a small table toward the back corner, clearly having a good time. Two very large colorful murals take up wall space with flourish. A snarling dog and reclined cat eye me warily. In fact, a number of people here, even the mural people, seem to eye me warily. Others appear more welcoming, though it seems like a place where it might be easy to wear out your welcome pretty quickly. The place is...disconcerting. A little threatening. A lost souls kind of place where you'll either have the time of your life or get your ass kicked. Hard. Wherever this is, whatever it is, it's colorful and intriguing – and Southern.

If you're an adventurous soul you might know this kind of place. Artist Justin Forbes knows this kind of place. And he can flat out render it and the people who populate it in all their colorful, eccentric Southern essence, accentuated with a deft twist of exaggeration. The particular place I've described is on, (one almost wants to say "in"), his colorful canvas entitled *Waiting for the Ball to Drop*.

DAD AND MAD

Artistry is in Justin Forbes' blood. His father is a professional photographer; his mother was a professional dancer. The artistic DNA coursing through this Texas resident's veins manifested itself quite early while growing up in California and both parents nurtured it. His father's photography impressed him and the visual field of the camera deeply informs the perspective of his paintings. An avid amateur photographer himself, Justin often creates his oil paintings by working off of photos he's taken or that someone else has provided. The images he ultimately renders in oil sometimes reflect techniques also associated with photography like wide-angle and forced perspectives, the latter a method employing optical illusion to artificially create certain spatial perceptions. "Being the son of a photographer has been very influential," Justin says. "I love taking photos myself. I sort of see the world through a wide-angle lens."

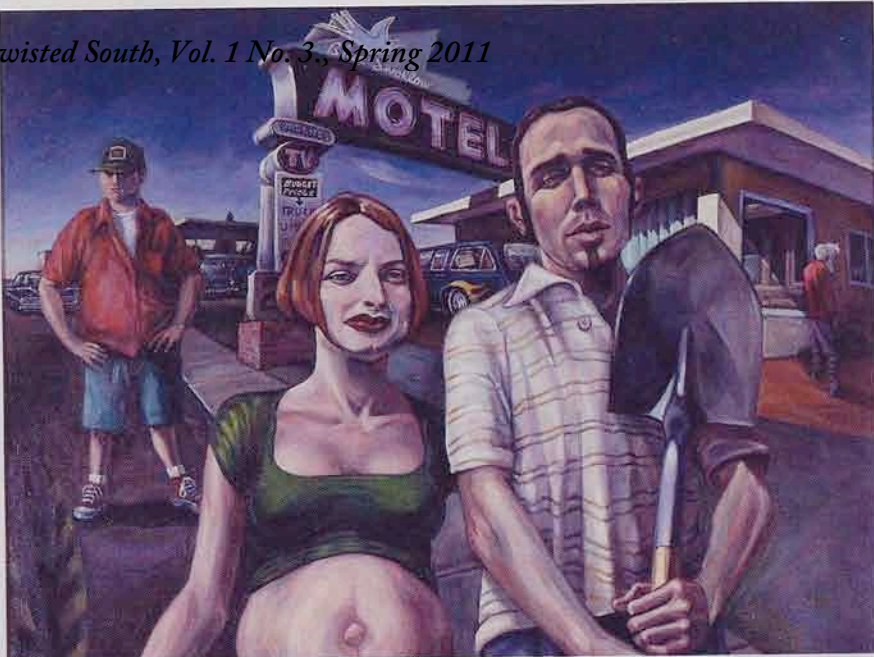
Justin says he usually starts out his artistic endeavors with several photographs, working up several sketches from them, sometimes including a Photoshop digital sketch, and then bringing the elements all together into one dramatic composition. Then he colors the sketch by hand (or digitally). Finally, he's ready to reproduce it on canvas. He likes a very smooth surface upon which to work so he sandpapers the canvas smooth. Next comes a fully tonal grayscale charcoal representation on the canvas that includes the light and shadow features. Then he retraces the charcoal outlines in purple or cobalt blue oil paints using an acrylic brush before starting to fill them in with brightly colored oil paints.

"I do an almost inverted underpainting process where I use complementary, sometimes very bright colors as a base for the top layer. Blue skies will have bright paint underneath. Warm flesh tones will have a bluish-green underneath. Red will be underneath the green leaves of a tree. That kind of thing. It makes the colors really dance for me. I like for my colors to really fly off the canvas. I just apply more and more medium and glazes until it looks right."

There is another early influence that continues to influence Justin's very colorful, playful, flowing style that sometimes elongates figures and otherwise plays with anatomy. "MAD magazine is something I religiously read from early on," admits Justin. "I love caricatures and parody. MAD helped me form my first style."

Justin's first venture into professional art was doing skateboard graphics for Santa Cruz Skateboards. An accomplished graphic artist named Jim Phillips who worked with the successful firm served as a mentor to him, teaching him everything he could about camera-ready art, silk-screening, and other facets of professional artistic reproduction. Justin soon became one of the company's star artists. He also delved into design-

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Neo American Gothic

ing and drawing rock posters and cd covers in those early days. But he wanted more. He wanted to test his talent at a higher level of aesthetic sensibility. He packed his things and moved to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts. It was here, and in the creative cauldron of his own imagination, that Justin refined his artistic vision and technique.

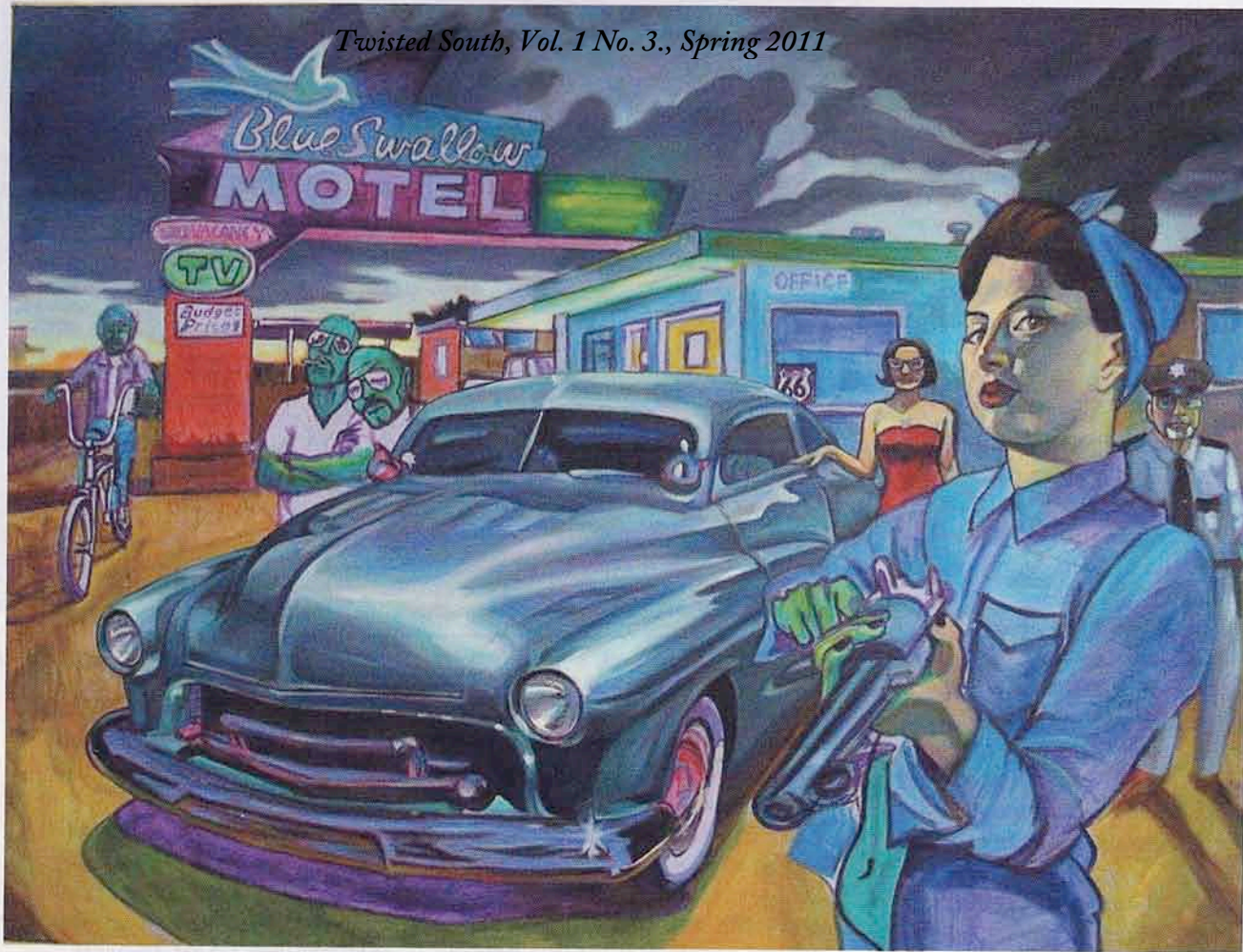
NEW ORLEANS LOWDOWN

After finishing his art school studies Justin found himself drawn to New Orleans, that cultural melting pot of the Deep South; a decidedly free-spirited city, at once shabby and chic, that he figured would provide a colorful backdrop for his work, an invigorating creative atmosphere, and a supportive community of artists and art lovers. He moved there in 1992. The Big Easy would end up giving him as much as he hoped and more than he bargained for.

"I fell in love with New Orleans. I adapted quite well to the southern way of living. The food, the rhythm – it fit me like a glove. There's a

special culture in the South. It's American but older and distinct." Justin was in New Orleans this first time for about seven years – productive years. After pouring out considerable artistic sweat equity in Louisiana's humid coastal climate, he worked up a heap of praise and exposure with his art. His work contained strong autobiographical and narrative elements and was infused with a newfound Southern sensibility. By 1999, he felt he needed a break and moved back to the Big Apple for a short period and then back to California. Refreshed, he was back in New Orleans by 2002 and ready to recharge his professional connection to the city. It was a few years later – August of 2005 to be precise – when New Orleans would drive a harder bargain with Justin in exchange for the privilege of living in its splendor, extracting a far higher price than he ever wanted to pay.

"I lost basically everything to Katrina – all my camera equipment, all my books, art supplies, clothing, all the paintings I had at home – everything. I had to start all over. I did find some photographs of paintings that I then used to recreate them but basically, I lost everything."



Clockwise from top: Blue Swallow, Fat Tuesday, and A Family Affair



**THERE'S A SPECIAL CULTURE
IN THE SOUTH. IT'S AMERICAN,
BUT OLDER AND DISTINCT.**



Losing virtually all of his possessions and enduring the hardships of the "refuge" at the Louisiana Superdome for five days (heck'uv a job Brownie) was traumatic for Justin. Witnessing the suffering of others, he says, was the most disturbing element of all.

"It was rough. Very traumatic. The apocalyptic nature of the whole Superdome scene. Seeing people suffer, seeing people die. You ever had a nightmare where it was the end of the world? It was like that. It was awful."

Justin and his girlfriend were finally able to catch a bus to Denton, Texas, for far better but still taxing circumstances at Camp Copass, a Baptist church campground where temporary housing was set up for some 300 Katrina refugees. Through the help of the community, they were able to get an apartment and establish a new life.

Justin has lived in Denton since Katrina and has not yet ventured back to New Orleans, despite the fact that it continues to be the locus of his greatest artistic success. He has four paintings in the permanent collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art

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at the University of New Orleans, reportedly the site of the largest collection of Southern art in the world, and he is represented by the Jonathan Ferrara Gallery in the city. The latter gallery will feature an exhibition of Justin's work running March 30-May 8 entitled "Halcyon Days." Now, more than five years post-Katrina, the Southern transplant says the Crescent City's siren song sounds louder in his ear and he feels that after going back for his upcoming exhibition he might "fall in love with New Orleans again and want to move back there."

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High Stakes