



# Big Time

Painter Mark George weaves a bright future from retro images and old-fashioned ideals

**If every picture tells a story, then these images are the equivalent of an audio sound bite.** A redheaded woman staring out with a stunned expression. A blonde woman weeping, her mouth a violent slash of red. A man's face, shocked as he stares at the hidden features of a woman who is pure mystery, the only clue to her personality a tightly pulled black ponytail.

Looking at the cartoon-like visages that inhabit Mark George's paintings is like being a voyeur. Privy to a secret, he captures the moment after in vibrant acrylics — after the photo has been taken, when the smiles begin to fade, like photographs of a phantom world still being developed.

The 39-year-old Jacksonville native speaks in a highly individual dialect, a patois best described as part shock-treatment outpatient, part surfer-stoner. But his comments show him to be an observant and erudite student of human nature. He's also a playful conversationalist who enjoys tossing a curveball.



Take, for example, George's half-joking comment on Downtown Jacksonville's First Wednesday Art Walk, which he says is "quickly replacing the Florida-Georgia football game as the world's biggest outdoor cocktail party." George made the comment in reference to a local exhibit's opening reception — a crush of giddy art fans swirling wine in plastic cups.

George is also fond of calling people and things "big." Brief examples from recent phone calls:

*Hey Mark, how are you doin'?*

*What's happening, Big 'Un?*

*Mark, did you ever find out the number for the gallery?*

*Big Time! I did.*

The riffing isn't annoying; more like a form of punctuation. Standing in his kitchen recently, George simultaneously makes stovetop espressos, cleans two glasses and stirs ziti in a thick, red sauce. He begins talking about the art



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# Big Time

scene in Portland and Seattle, and winds up sitting on the blue, sensible couch in his house, talking excitedly about his greatest hero of art, Marcel Duchamp.

“Other than my mother and father, I have the most respect for him out of anyone in the world,” says George, sipping at his espresso. By the time he died in 1968, multimedia artist Duchamp had already defiantly reshaped the 20th Century art world, having been the direct catalyst of both Dadaism and its even weirder offspring, surrealism. Among other things, he was known for his playful approach to artistic materials and use of “found” objects.

“He was the man,” raves George. “He was the original badass. Here was a guy that just did not give a f\*ck ... about money or anything else. He just wanted to hang out with Man Ray and play chess.” George continues: “Here was the guy who invented cubism and just gave it away. Picasso was one of the first artists to make a million dollars in his own lifetime and Duchamp just gave that idea away ... *gave it away*. Who was really the master?”

He shakes his head in disbelief, moved by how on-point Duchamp was. Then he sits, jittery and jacked up on black espressos, but silenced by the pure power of big-time beautiful art.

## “In my opinion, it all went down in the '70s.”

Why is that?

“Well, when I was growing up in the '70s and watching ‘Scooby Doo,’ and then saw reruns of ‘Johnny Quest’ in the afternoon ... I started really discovering things.”

George was, in his words, “conceived in San Marco” — a true child of Jacksonville. Asked if he was a hippie art child, he breaks into laughter at the very notion. “My parents *were not* hippies,” he says emphatically. But they were highly encouraging of their son. George’s mom was a beautician in Murray Hill, his dad a repairman who worked for the Jacksonville Electrical Authority and had his own creative calling, saving the old furniture folks tossed out all along his daily repair route in Springfield.

“JEA had an almost wacky [rental] racket, sort of like how Southern Bell would rent you these phones — you couldn’t even buy one! — and when your grandpa died, you would continue to make payments for the next hundred years. And so my dad repaired the stoves and appliances that JEA rented to people.” His dad was also a scavenger, bringing home furniture to repair and refinish. One day, George recalls, he father came home with a box. “He was like, ‘Check out these cool comic books that I brought you.’ This was like around 1979 and the comics were from the early '60s ...”

George stops in mid-sentence, caught off guard by his own reverie. “I’ll be 40 in October and I’m totally all right with that! I finally got a Folio Weekly article!” Laughing, he adds, “I really waited it out, Dan!”

The comics that Mr. George brought home influenced his son, but not as one might expect. The superheroes opened him up to the work the comic book artists were doing outside of the frame, like John Romita, whom George calls “My Main Man.” Though Romita is best known for Spider-Man comics, George particularly admires his earlier illustrations in romance comic novels — books with titles like “Falling in Love,” “Girls’ Love Stories” and “Young Love.” Talking to George, it’s no surprise to learn that

he was bored with something as common or superficial as a preening superhero in tights. The art that spoke to him was emotional, dramatic. It dealt with big things, big-time things. It is mildly ironic that these epiphanies were delivered in girls’ comics. Though George was a kid, he apparently received an adult dose of what reality is — or at least how it could be slapped out as a halftone on a page. But he didn’t try to emulate his new creative heroes by tracing the images or even trying to copy their styles. George really didn’t even draw very much as a child.

“You have to understand that I just looked and looked and looked and looked ... I really just observed for like the longest time.”

As a teen, George attended the venerable (his own words, delivered with affection) “Westside F\*cking Skills Center,” where he

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studied commercial and graphic art, and where, he jokes, the teachers were all hung-over and pissed off to be there. The pre-PC graphic design skills set was very different — all wax machines and tape measures — but George enjoyed working with raw materials.

And then Marilyn Monroe arrived in Mark’s life. “This is kind of ridiculous,” he confesses, “but I was in that old record store, Yesterday and Today, and it had novelty stuff on the walls that they were hoping was saleable.” Someone had taken a copy of Marilyn Monroe’s U.S. Army ID badge and blown it up poster size. “It wasn’t the most flattering or complimentary shot,” says George. “Just the idea that some guy ran across this badge of hers, enlarged it on a Photostat camera and made a huge print of it and started selling it ... and I just thought that was a good idea. I remember thinking, ‘I bet I could make some money doing something like that.’”

While countless painters have devoted lifetimes attempting to identify themselves by their brushstroke, Mark George has been just as cautious to leave not so much as a fingerprint. He embraces his paintings' anonymity.



George's family moved south to St. Johns County, where he wound up attending Nease High School, and where two crucial events occurred. In 1988, he met longtime friend and compadre in all things creative, Brian Hicks. (Hicks, who helped form the bands Gizzard and Tropic of Cancer, died of cancer in July. Says George, "I loved him. He was my bro.") Nease is also where the burgeoning artist took three more years of graphic arts classes, thriving in the realm of design.

"I'm not a real designer," says George, "but I work with people who are." George points to local artist and his co-worker at San Marco's Giglio Signs, Mark Cooper, as "a real designer" and "a huge mentor." George's view on design and composition is rooted in effort and training. "If you can sort of school yourself to have an eye to really *see* something, then you really just achieve it," he explains. "You can have some God-given talent, but you need to help things along so they can *occur*."

**Serendipity is a funny thing, and there is no accounting for when grace decides to enter the picture frame.**

In his late teens and early 20s, Mark George grew sick of his training and knowledge of commercial art and design. He abruptly shifted gears into what he describes as his "punk" phase, but punk in its grandest and freest form. Punk like Marcel Duchamp throwing a urinal on stage and signing it "R. Mutt," or distractedly giving cubism to the world, impatient to get back to his chess game.

"In around 1989, I was in Callahan with my cousin and we drove into this barn area at a taxidermist's and there was this mounted mountain goat." It wasn't in great shape — the wool had split down the seams on the back of its head — but it had a renegade appeal all its own. George brought it to a friend's house and hung it, his first foray into a very different kind of creative expression. He soon found work designing cassette covers for local underground bands like Common Thread, Flaw (later Fin Fang Foom) and Lysergic Garage Party (now the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based band Orange Park) and began devoting his time to making art assemblages. One piece, based around the Red Cross symbol, was made from a series of wooden knives hammered onto the wall with

16-penny finishing nails, and eventually included his favorite found object, that split-headed goat.

And then there's his piece "The Ricky Nelson Nine Point Buck." George acquired a stuffed deer head from the guys in Rein Sanction (former band of fellow artist and Fox Restaurant owner Ian Chase). "I think I paid them like \$12 or maybe a third of a bag of weed," he laughs.

Unlike the goat's, the buck's head was in good shape. George took that and two fox furs he'd bought from Paxon Thrift Store, complete with teeth and glass eyes. ("They were like 20 bucks apiece," George recalls. "I was poor as shit, but I had to have those.") He hung the fox furs around the buck, along with an axe handle inscribed, in cursive: "In the town of broken dreams, the streets are filled with regret." He dubbed the piece "Fish Camp." "That was like the pinnacle of assemblage work," says George.

Fellow Northeast Florida artist Tony Rodrigues recalls another memorable object from the era of Riverside-based punk art. It involved an old, manual typewriter that Mark had reconfigured, removing all of the keyboard's letters, replacing them with roofing tacks. The only letters remaining, in the middle of what used to be the keyboard, read "Pain."

"Even back then, it was just like, Marcel Duchamp, you know?" says Rodrigues. "Mark was just really intuitive."

**Twenty years after seeing those first scavenged comic books, and after much creative head-tripping, George's intuition was at a rolling boil.**

Standing in a comic book store on the Southside with friend and fellow art freak Chris Spohn, grace and providence reappear. Bored, waiting for Spohn to make his purchase, George thumbed through a box of Romance Comics — and his muse made yet another wardrobe change.

Around 2000, George collaborated with Rodrigues on his first foray into painting. Why did it take so long? "I was trapped in my own bubble, basically," says George. Urged on by his friend's mantra — "You don't have to be a painter to paint" — the pair improvised a tandem approach that Rodrigues compared to the classic parlor game, Exquisite Corpse, with each artist riffing on the other's ideas. Looking

# Big Time

at the painting a decade on, both artists' styles are apparent. Rodrigues' use of acrylic color fields and photocopies of male sex offenders find an odd harmony with George's expertly rendered lettering copied from a classic Red Skull comic book. "Tony did most of the work," demurs George.

George discovered his ultimate choice in painting materials at a hardware store. Today, his pop art-style pieces are hand-assembled; he attaches plastic strips generally used for roofing to a piece of Masonite board, on which he fixes a square of greenhouse roofing material. He then uses acrylic paints to create an image on the inside of the transparent, wavy surface. What we see is essentially a mirror of what he paints.

Asked why he went from being a graphic design dork to a psychedelic primitive, playing with bones and fur, to making deliberately "conveyor-made" pieces, George says he admires those who have the "ability to make commercial art into fine art." He doesn't consider his work homage to the pop art of Lichtenstein or Warhol, though he recognizes the similarity. "They are all very uniform and plastic," says George of the people in his paintings, "and instead of giving them any character, I don't lend them any at all."

Most impressive is the care he takes in removing texture or any sign of actual brushwork. While countless painters have devoted lifetimes attempting to identify themselves by their brushstroke, George has been just as cautious to not leave so much as a fingerprint. He embraces his paintings' anonymity.

"They are like driving down the highway and seeing decaying, rural road signs."

In spite of his success at remaining a faceless observer in his art, the last few years have brought Mark George greater critical success as well as gradual financial profits. He is now a bona fide homeowner, and a recent sizable sale to a local collector provided the precious funds to fix his roof. Another benefit of his diligence has been in finding acceptance among his peers. Locally, he cites Rodrigues and Max Wood as people he holds close to his heart. He sometimes hangs with the creative miscreants who orbit around Nullspace, and he expresses admiration for the Star Wars-Beatles mashups of painter James Hance, and painter Crystal Floyd as well as Mark Creegan's use of "non-painterly" materials. Finally, he gives big props to St. Augustine's Rob DePiazza and the crucial shows he's hosted over the years at The Gallery at Screen Arts.

How does that camaraderie feel? "Badass," he says. Last year, George was invited to appear in the traveling group show "Pre-existing Condition," which featured such contemporary luminaries as Anthony Ausgang, KRK Ryden and Shepard Fairy, designer of the ubiquitous Obama/Hope image. Just recently, he was invited to participate in a group show themed around "Barbarella," the 1960s B-movie classic that starred a young bombshell named Jane Fonda.

George is now bumping up his game with his biggest group show to date. Held every December since 2002, Art Basel Miami Beach — sister to the definitive art show that originated in 1970 in Basel, Switzerland — is a three-day show that draws thousands of artists and has been called "the Olympics of the art world." The South Florida version now overshadows its European ancestor in size, turnout and impact. George attended the show

in 2007, carrying a few pieces of his own work, and ignoring the advice of his increasingly embarrassed friends.

"They said, 'Dude! Don't do that. It's tacky!'"

His indifference to being cool paid off, big time. "These people would walk up and say, 'How much? Three?'" Mark quickly sold all of his work, but his profits were bittersweet when he realized he could have earned 10 times as much. "Oh, three *thousand!*" he laughs, pointing an index finger to his temple. "Can I have a gun now?"

This year, George returns to Art Basel Miami Beach as part of the group show "The Panelists," a traveling exhibit curated by friend KRK and featuring peers Mitch O'Connell, Niagara, Pizz, Spain Rodriguez and Mark Mothersbaugh. And he will enter the esteemed cultural event with invitation in hand. "Reality is the biggest trip," he says.

George's work has been embraced by a community of artists who find a home in the popular Juxtapoz Magazine, a scene the art world describes as outsider art. Mark loathes the term. "I call them the West Coast Illustrators," he jokes. Regardless of nomenclature, Mark has surely painted his way inside an impressive circle. When I warn George that he may become famous, he's naturally dismissive, "I hate having photographs taken of me!" I fire off four shots with my cell phone for posterity's sake.

## On Oct. 1, George's latest work is featured in a gallery show in Riverside

alongside another once-local painter who found fame, Ronnie Land. Over the last two decades, the Atlanta-based Land has seen his odd totem-like "Little Bunny Foo Foo" and brilliant flyer art "Loss Cat" bring him an almost accidental fame that's as much deserved as it is beautifully weird. The duo's show is the inaugural opening at the new Versus Gallery in the Five Points Theatre Building, owned and operated under the auspices of local cultural players Christy Frazier and Tom Pennington.

Because he was an artsy teen in the Yuppie Wormhole of the '80s, I ask if he was ever drawn to or inspired by the fame (and then seismic sales) of artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring or Julian Schnabel. He answers with an emphatic shake of his head, instead invoking another "awesome bad-ass" and one more in the lineage of what he calls "accidental pioneers," the celebrated 20th century architect and designer Eero Saarinen. Like George's beloved Duchamp, Saarinen's fabled life is as poignant as it was visionary.

"As a child, he entered a competition with his father to design a sculptural project for the city of St. Louis. He designed the St. Louis [Gateway] Arch as a child and won this contest, spent his whole life seeing its construction and ... " here George laughs " ... died before it was completed!"

I point at our now-empty coffee cups, a high sign by the universe that our talk is about done. Mark George agrees.

"Shut it down, Big Time!" □

*The opening reception for Mark George vs. Ronnie Land is held on Friday, Oct. 1 from 6-10 p.m. at Versus Gallery, 1022 Park St., Ste. 407, Fourth Floor, Five Points Theatre Building, Jacksonville. 982-8982.*

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