

'Dream to Dream'

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO - HP Features Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 29, 2015

ST. JOSEPH - The bus ride John Bankston took from his apartment to his studio in an old naval shipyard on San Francisco Bay was always long, often noisy, and sometimes raucous.

For a while he tried to block it out. He would read. He tried listening to music. And then one day he simply decided to start listening to what people were saying.

"There were a lot of characters who would get on and off the bus," Bankston says by telephone from his San Francisco studio. "So I started this exercise of sitting down and just sort of drawing these pictures of things I heard on the bus or people I remembered from the bus as a way to get rid of all that excess stimulation. Then it became more than an exercise. At some point these characters started informing my own stories. They were sort of like daydreams that eventually become drawings or paintings."

Since then, Bankston has used his penchant for the kind of deep, wide lines found in coloring books to create artwork filled with brightly hued figures from mythical lands in often ambiguous narratives to address subjects such as transformation and identity. His latest series of works from 2010-14 is showcased in "Dream to Dream: The Art of John Bankston," which opens Friday and continues through April 26 at the Krasl Art Center.

"His work is so colorful and so approachable and inviting," says Tami Miller, the center's curator of exhibitions, collections and education. "Sometimes contemporary art can be more challenging than others, so I love that he is a contemporary artist who, on one level, is so accessible, but there's still some contemplation that goes into it for the viewer."

What makes this exhibition particularly special, for both the Krasl and the artist, is that Bankston was born and raised in Benton Harbor, yet this will be the first time his artwork has been shown in his home community in his prolific professional career.

"This probably dates me, but I can remember going to the opening of the Krasl Art Center (in 1980)," he



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Benton Harbor native John Bankston's "The Prince No. 1," on display as part of "Dream to Dream," a new exhibit opening Friday at the Krasl Art Center.

says. "At that time if someone said to me that one day I would be showing here, it would have been impossible to believe."

While Bankston says he has always been interested in art, the idea of actually becoming an artist seemed like a childhood fantasy.

"I was always drawing, but I didn't really know what it meant to be an artist," he says. "I knew that there was art and people made art, but I didn't know how you got to do that."

Bankston took local art classes in the summer, and, he even remembers as a 9-year-old having his drawing of baseball player Vida Blue selected for the Michigan Art Train. But by the time he graduated from Lake Michigan Catholic High School and landed at the University of Chicago, he chose to major in biology with thoughts of going to medical school.

"The I took an art class and met people studying art," he says. "I thought, wow, you can go to college to study art? That changed my way of thinking."

Bankston finished that biology degree in 1985, then started working on building a portfolio. He was accepted into The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1990. In 1993, he headed to San Francisco. Bankston had several solo and group exhibitions, but he credits his inclusion in 1999's "Bay Area Now 2" at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, and 2001's "Freestyle" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, N.Y., as the catalysts to his career.

"For 'Bay Area Now 2,' I wanted to play with a loose narrative that maybe you would find in a coloring book where there's kind of a story but as you turn the pages it's not necessarily linear," he says. "I was also interested in that line in the coloring book and how that line is what defines the image. That was really where it started. Using the line and the activity of coloring as a way to activate that space."

That idea is apparent in "Dream to Dream." In "The Prince No. 1," a 44-by-32-inch oil on linen painting, Bankston uses those same thick lines to outline a prince in a bright blue uniform riding a brown horse, while "Mysterious Group," a 48-by-54-inch oil painting seems to feature that same prince holding wilted flowers standing next to a cowboy, his horse, and a man wearing a yellow wolf costume. Most of the paintings in this collection feature characters in some sort of costume.

"Some of the costumes are actually things I'll see on the street in San Francisco," Bankston says. "But with some of the costumes I wanted them to be simple, like a child would make, if they suddenly decided to be some superhero or someone else. It's a way of saying this is a world of my own invention and allows these characters to be their own inventions, too."

Another hallmark of Bankston works is that his characters are almost always black, which he says is a conscious choice.

"When I was growing up, there were very few coloring books that had black characters in them," Bankston says. "I knew I wanted them to be black; however, I wanted them to have these open faces where they might not be colored. They could be the color of the ground or the color of the paper as a way

for the viewer to step in and sort of finish coloring the picture, because we sort of color our world based on our own experiences."

This particular collection features characters often standing next to or interacting with a series of stacked, abstract shapes.

"I did a couple series of drawings where characters got together and built this machine, this kind of stacking of shapes, really," he says. "I call them abstracticators. It's a great way for me to play with an abstracted figure."

The Walter Maciel Gallery in Los Angeles and Rena Bransten Projects in San Francisco, who represent Bankston, have lent work to this exhibition as well as supported the Krasl's production of an exhibition catalog - the first for the center since 2008, when it created a catalog of its permanent collection.

"It was really an exciting opportunity," says Miller, who discovered Bankston's work when his painting "Cover Up" appeared on the front of *New American Paintings* (2013, No. 109). "There's a little more scholarship for people out there to sift through and educate people about his work. For us, it shows something we were doing at a point and time, and gives us both a little bit of prestige."

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