

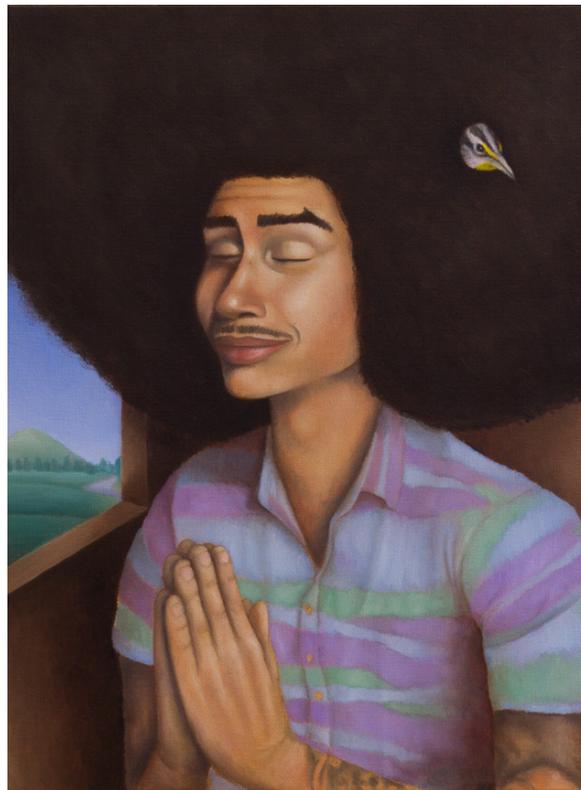


DAVID WARNER

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Jake Troyli at the Arts Xchange Gallery: Racial divides addressed with comic precision

The gallery's first solo show goes to a "crazy mixed" young talent who left a basketball career behind to make art.



TIGHT FIT: Troyli's "Window Shopping." COURTESY JAKE TROYLI

Jake Troyli is used to standing out in a crowd.

"I would say on average, if I'm out in public, that around six or seven people will ask me how tall I am," says Troyli, 27, a second-year MFA student in studio art at USF who happens to be 6'9".

The next question inevitably is: Did you play basketball?

The answer, as it turns out, is yes. He was a star player, transferring from Canterbury School to Pinellas Park High School in his junior and senior years, where he was recruited for college ball, playing at Presbyterian and graduating with a BFA from Lincoln Memorial University. He was especially good at three-pointers — still is.

He doesn't play anymore, though, except for the occasional pickup game ("It's fun to dunk on old men"). These days he's standing out for a different reason: Awarded a Creative Pinellas Emerging Artist grant last year, he has now been selected as the first artist to have a solo show in the public gallery space of the new Arts Xchange complex in the Warehouse Arts District (WADA), opening during this month's Second Saturday.

"I wanted our first solo show to be fresh, original, but yet support an emerging artist. And he grew up here!" says WADA's new executive director, Diane Bailey Morton. Troyli is the kind of young artist, she says, "who can create a conversation about art."

And that's exactly what Troyli wants his art to do: open up conversations. He's used to uncomfortable questions, not just about his height, but about his ethnicity.

"I'm like *crazy* mixed," he told me last week at his engagingly cluttered studio at USF. Both his mother and father are mixed race, and he has moved among such disparate worlds — from college basketball, where almost all his teammates were black, to a graduate art program where he's the only African-American student — that he's acutely conscious of the differences. "I've always lived simultaneously as a mixed man, but also a black man."

He deals candidly, often humorously, with this sense of otherness in his paintings, while remaining aware that as an artist he's both exploring and exploiting it. His stunning large-scale piece "Everything must go ... maybe even you!" is an aerial view of an imagined race history museum in a shopping mall, where nude African-American men and women, cartoonishly lanky and near-identical except for breasts and penises, view works by contemporary black artists like Kerry James Marshall and Kara Walker and browse a gift shop where Ku Klux Klan hoods hang next to "I can't breathe" T-shirts. It's a barbed critique of the commodification of race, but in working on it Troyli couldn't get away from the ironies.

"I'm a person of color sitting here laboring over Klan hoods — what does that *mean*?"

Like much of his work, "Everything must go" draws you in with its comic sensibility — and then hits you, wham!, when you examine the details. "Humor is a language I love to use in my painting," he says. "It gives a window of accessibility that makes people more open to talking about serious issues. It's a good way to be subversive, right?"

His talents, both visual and verbal, were encouraged by his mother, Ka-Rim Troyli, who provided him with comic books and graphic novels and worked for many years in administrative roles at American Stage. Jake remembers long days spent at Shakespeare in the Park rehearsals when he was 9 or 10, "watching them do *Midsummer Night's Dream* and shit. I could read and understand and quote Shakespeare... Then I hated it, but now I think, 'Damn, that was such a great thing.'" It was at American Stage that he first met Bob Devin Jones, who would go on to found Studio@620 and give Jake his first solo show after he graduated from college. "I am really thankful they gave me that opportunity because that work was so bad." (The Studio has continued to be a boon for him: He drew pictures of St. Pete's homeless community for *Broken Lives Illustrated*, a celebrated documentary that was shown there in 2014, and it was Devin Jones who drew Diane Bailey Morton's attention to his artwork.)

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He started making money off his art as early as sixth grade at Bay Point Middle, though maybe not via the route a parent would find ideal: He was drawing porn for his classmates, at \$5 a pic. He got caught and had to tell his mother, and then his teacher called — not to express her moral outrage but to tell his mother, “You know, he’s really a good artist.”



STUDIO VISIT: Jake Troyli at USF. DAVID WARNER

He drew throughout his basketball career, too: His teammates would ask him to draw tattoos for them. But the artist finally overtook the baller.

“I had things I wanted to talk about,” he says, “and basketball wasn’t the platform to do that. You’re a cog in the machine.” The questions he wanted to ask — about racial division, about black male stereotypes, about his own role in these systems — weren’t going to be addressed on the basketball court.

An important figure in his artwork is Jake himself. Among his self-portraits is one, “Window shopping,” in which he places himself inside a scene reminiscent of a Renaissance painting. “I was really interested in Kerry James Marshall’s thoughts on the presence or absence of the black figure in the history of painting. I wanted to put myself in some of these motifs — the countryside in the background, this little confessional booth. But then I wanted to think how I could *not* fit into these settings, so I used my Afro to break the plane.” Again, the work is appealing in its whimsy (complete with the little bird ensconced in his ’fro), but draws you into a much deeper conversation.

As a black heterosexual male painter directly addressing issues of race, he occupies a unique place in the contemporary art world, at least as represented at USF. “I’ve never been more aware of my race than when I’ve been here,” he says.

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But his disarming combination of self-confidence and self-deprecation is rarer still, embodied in one of the most striking images in his show, the self-portrait “Always leave them wanting more.” Dressed in red against a background of royal blue, with dark brown hair streaming behind him and his arms upraised, he’s either plummeting to the ground or streaking across the sky superhero-style, his facial expression a mix of resignation and “Wheeee!” His elongated form is literally and figuratively a stretch (the nickname, as it happens, for his position as the three-pointer guy), and that’s what he seems to be doing with his life and his work: The sky’s the limit.



STRETCHED: Troyli’s “Always Leave Them Wanting More.” *COURTESY JAKE TROYLI*