

Photofest artist drawn to bright colors

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Thirty years ago Ned M. Stacey, known as the artist NED, was sitting in a Shoney's restaurant doodling names on a napkin for his new business. From scribbles to brick and mortar, Cosmic Cat Comics was born.

With a storefront in Railroad Square, NED eventually converted part of his surplus space within the comic book store into Renditions, An Art Space, which he envisioned as both a gallery and shared workspace for himself and local artists. As one of the photographers included in Photofest 2017, an annual exhibition presented by the Council on Culture & Arts at the Artport Gallery, NED is thrilled to show the community the importance of the arts through his artwork.

"Everything is based on art in some way," explains NED. "Many people don't realize they're looking at art every day no matter where they're looking. You can't take a brown covered book and put it in a store and have someone buy it."

NED's store shelves are well stocked with imaginative and colorful worlds of graphic design and storytelling, though he prefers reading about the adventures of everyday people versus those of cape-clad superhumans. His first influences did come from science fiction and fantasy however, as his paintings and photographs sought to emulate artists like Jeffrey Jones and Frank Frazetta.

It was the comics' bright colors that kept him turning pages. With oils as his preferred medium, NED can never get enough of the bold cadmium red, and relies on mixing with a basic color palette to create striking images. Whether he's painting in his home studio or at Renditions, NED can take nearly 40 hours over the course of many days to complete a work. At the end of every day he takes a photo of his progress and uploads it to his Facebook page — from the first sketch to the final product — and will use an unorthodox method to catch his mistakes.

"Flipping your picture upside-down



Artist NED is one of the photographers included in Photofest 2017. NED

or looking at it in a mirror, will show you things that you can't see just by looking at it straight on," says NED. "If you've painted something and flip it upside down and it looks good you've done something right."

With portrait work this is especially pertinent, as NED focuses on getting the small intricacies of his subjects' faces as accurate as possible. He's not always striving for perfection, however, like in his painting "Wonderland" in which he let go of making the Alice character look like his reference photo. He's also begun focusing more on what to do with the backgrounds of his canvases and looks up to portrait artists like Jana Brike and Danny Malboeuf, who provide him with inspiration.

"You look at [Malboeuf's] paintings and you have no clue what's going on," laughs NED. "There will be plastic army men sitting on a table or watermelons in the picture and you'll question why they are there. There's so much stuff you can't believe how he could get it all into one painting."

Like Malboeuf, NED's portraits always feature a female character, and he

especially enjoys capturing the facial expressions of teenagers. He always wants the subject looking right at the viewer, and states that there "should be something quirky about them that you can't quite put your finger on."

His current project is painting the children of famous international photographers, as they often take "the best candid photos." Adding a collage of elements in the background provides a challenge. In his last two portraits, NED added an element that represented where the girls were from within the I-Spy-esque assortment behind them.

"I incorporated a wind-up airplane dropping flowers, a fence with graffiti, and a submarine with a French flag," describes NED. "I have ideas for what certain things might mean, but it's totally off the wall. In a way, you're putting together a puzzle."

NED enjoys exploring the relationship between painting and photography, is always looking to up the ante in his work. He's excited to see reactions to his work, "Brothers" which will be on display in Photofest 2017, and he hopes viewers will wonder how he made the

If you go

What: Photofest 2017

When: Opening reception, 6-7:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 17, exhibition on display through Jan. 8

Where: Artport Gallery, 3300 Capital Circle SW

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-2500 or visit <http://coca.tallahasseearts.org/art-in-public-places/artport-gallery>.

photo. The exhibition will be on display in the Artport Gallery through Jan. 8, and the opening, public reception will be held on Nov. 17.

While it's one of the most tweaked photographs he's ever produced, originally, he took the photo at a family wedding. After altering it using a special digital program, NED gave it more painterly qualities by enhancing the colors and contrast. It also captures the innocence that he finds captivating in many of his young subjects.

"With that age group, kids still haven't faced the huge problems of the world," says NED. "They still have a weirdness about them that I like."

NED also believes in the power of art to preserve. While his portraits, in a way, freeze his subjects in time, he finds that painting can spark lost recollections and stories. The actual act of creating, however, provides a safe haven within the mind that he encourages everyone to visit.

"I always say, if you have a lot of problems, you should take up painting," says NED. "If you want to jog your memory, go paint a picture of someone. Sometimes when you're painting, euphoria comes over you and it puts you in a really good mood. It's total escapism."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).