

alpha sixty



In the Studio with Todd Bienvenu

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Don't be fooled by the televisions or the MacBook Pros. Don't be misled by the cigarettes or beer cans or groping hands on naked bodies. Brooklyn-based artist Todd Bienvenu might deal in contemporary subject matter of the more carnal, pedestrian sort, but he is a student of his craft, with a firm interest in—as he puts it—the “nuts and bolts” of painting. Bienvenu has a BFA from Louisiana State University and an MFA from the New York Studio School. He's shown with CANADA, yours mine & ours, Life at Mars Gallery, to name a few. A year ago, he returned to his undergrad alma mater to teach painting and drawing to a new crop of students. For Bienvenu, painting is life—and there is plenty of life in his paintings.

Creativity came early to the Arkansas-born artist. In junior high, Bienvenu started messing around with drawing comics, which earned him the undue ridicule of his peers and caused him to take a step back from less popular passions. After high school, he tried his hand at architecture at the University of Colorado at Boulder before jumping ship at the urging of his parents. He landed at Louisiana State University. A painting teacher there introduced Bienvenu to the idea you could actually be a professional artist. And so he endeavored to become one.

The aesthetic Bienvenu has honed over the years offers chunky renderings of sex, beer, and rock 'n' roll, in a style that feels almost softly Cubist. The hands and feet of his subjects have a Picasso-esque quality to them, as does his sense of a kind of twisted (though routinely playful) macabre. To be sure, Bienvenu keeps things light, and his strong sense of humor permeates throughout. Unicorn tattoos, penis graffiti, the arms of a cactus reaching for a nearly-bare butt: Bienvenu winks and nods at fodder too often eschewed by the snobbier of the art crowd, but so frequently consumed by the rest of us mere mortals. It feels, in a word, honest.

Below, we talk to Bienvenu about supportive parents and art camp supplies, ex-cons and car shops, and why an artist must always prioritize the practice, no matter the obstacle.

Former occupation and your most notable memory there:

Jiffy Lube in high school. I had a shirt that said “Lubrication Technician” on the sleeve. I can remember goofing off with my friend Brad. We would tell customers we ran out of the correct oil filter for their car and send them to the other place so we wouldn’t have to do anything. Brad would go to McDonald’s every day and get a Quarter Pounder with Cheese (ketchup only) or a Subway sandwich with only meat and bread. They had a lot of ex-cons working in the lower bay—huge guys covered in tattoos while the wholesome high schoolers were up top. I learned how to drive a stick shift there. Later, I worked at the Excelsior Hotel as a valet with my brother. Taught him how to drive a stick there in some poor bastard’s car. We got in trouble for doing donuts in the parking lot.

Were your parents interested in the arts? What did they do for work?

They were supportive. I remember going to art camp when I was young and having lots of drawing supplies. My dad bought me a drafting table when I was into comic books. They never tried to dissuade me. My grandparents have lots of tasteful nude oil paintings in their home. Last time I was there, their housekeeper made a comment about all the naked lady paintings. I always loved “the butt sisters” painting in the downstairs bathroom.



When you were drawing comic books in junior high, was there one character/storyline in particular you worked on most often?

I liked to copy my favorites: Jim Lee, Todd McFarlane, Frank Miller, X-Men, Spawn, Batman. I tried to make my own, but it seemed like the plot was just a bloodbath full of derivative characters murdering each other. I really think those anatomy lessons—drawing superheroes in tights—helped me when I got to art school figure drawing class.

I read that junior high was pretty tough for you socially. Do you think that helped form you in any meaningful way? Would you go back in time and change anything?

It made me who I am. Part of me as an adult has empathy for them. It occurs to me that some of their home-lives maybe weren’t great. I guess the same feeling you have for someone who votes for Trump: great pity, tempered with extreme rage. Thanks for the therapy, Class of ’98, I’ll never go back to Arkansas again. Having said that, NYC is full of all the interesting people who experienced that and worse, and we wouldn’t trade places with those boring Red State people for anything. I’d rather live in a cardboard box in Brooklyn than a mansion in Arkansas. No offense, cool Arkansans.

Where would you be today if you had stuck with architecture in college?

Ha! That seemed like an art-related job at the time. I thought I could be artsy and employed. I’m just not good at the 9 to 5. Maybe I’d be a sculptor or furniture builder or something else handy, but not on someone else’s clock.



Have you always explored the themes your work focusses on today (sex, drinking, life, etc)?

No. It used to be more about the experience of looking, or just painting for painting. Maybe nonspecific anxiety. I think it took a while for me to be comfortable with my depiction of my interests. I'm on-the-wagon right now so the drinking bit is kind of not happening right now. But yeah, I'm an Expressionist, personal-story kind of painter. A painter's painter. Concepts that are voiced with paint merely being the vehicle aren't as compelling to me as personal expression that speaks to the universal. I'm not into setting up rules for their own sake—a high conceptualism kind of thing.

How do you find your subjects? Do you work from memory, photos, abstractions?

All of the above. I'm always looking for stuff to paint. I think it's best if it's something really dumb and obvious, but then you twist it. Like if you've ever played music, great songs are never complicated; it's doing something simple in an interesting way.

How did you find your current workspace and where is it?

I've worked in something like six studios this year: three in Bushwick, an upstate residency, two in Europe. The current Bushwick one is a building I've been in on three separate occasions over the years. Walkable to my apartment, good vibes. It used to be a friend's but she moved away.



What's a day typically look like for you, from start to finish?

Wake up, putter, walk to studio, putter, work a bit, go have lunch, take a nap, work a bit more, walk home, read, play some guitar, watch a movie. I go to openings and people come visit the studio, go to the bar and have a seltzer.

Do you listen to music while you work? If so, what?

Yes. Spotify. I make a playlist every month.

Biggest stereotype about the South that's true:

The Southern thing is complicated. I'm sort of proud of certain aspects, but I could live in New Orleans and no other place down there. Maybe Austin. It's really painful to hear someone who seems like a nice person say some crazy ignorant bullshit. But I do know that Southerners make great New Yorkers.



What are you currently working on?

Just coming off a solo at Galerie Sébastien Bertrand in Geneva, so I'm in research-and-experimentation mode. I'm gearing up for my next solo in April at yours mine and ours in the Lower East Side.

What medium or tool are you most interested in presently and why?

Acrylic paint. I can paint with the windows closed and keep the cold out during winter.

What book/ film/ work of art most recently captured your attention and why?

The Max Beckmann at the Met. Those paintings are super important to me. Great to see them up close.

What's the best piece of advice you were ever given?

Bill Jensen says you should have low overhead. Any success I've had is because I may not have always had a place to live, but I've always had a space to paint. Sometimes that was a studio with an air mattress in the corner (that my studiomate and the landlord didn't necessarily know about). NYC is expensive. To pay two rents and have a full-time practice is difficult in the beginning. I always tried to choose painting and tried to put my money into that. Keep it cheap, prioritize the practice.