

A deliberate liberation
in latex paint

Felici's faces

BY JOHN EWING
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'O'utsider" is the current label for self-taught artists, but it's an odd fit for one as cosmopolitan as Paco Felici. Born in Brazil to Italian parents, the 32-year-old painter grew up in Mexico, Algeria, Canada, Egypt, and Texas. He brings this worldly point of view to the deceptively simple works now showing at W.D. Deli. Though self-taught, the artwork of Austin-based Felici is more populist than folk. His large, cartoon portraits ease the tensions of cultural difference with their bright colors and uniform style.

Felici's best-known work is the spiky-crowned *Libertad*. She is a young, hip Lady Liberty whose multi-culti familia includes *Tio Sam*, *Gorbachev* and *El Rey* (Elvis) could be kinfolk, as well, with their bulging eyes, full lips, and other distinctive features that make up Felici's graphic shorthand. Though repetitive, this flat-face formula is surprisingly expressive and thickly outlined with subversive humor. *African American Gothic*, for instance, recasts Grant Wood's classic painting with the contentious, black icons of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben.

Though less familiar to viewers, *Krispy Kreme* also uses the portrait format to foreground an overlooked subject. In his uniform and cap, the young man is Felici's nod to the African Americans pictured in the kitchen backgrounds of old photographs that decorate the chain of donut shops. Again, the theme of liberty is a subtext that

Felici addresses with the special insight of an immigrant. "Liberty for everyone in our society is messy and imperfect," notes the artist, "but it's something fundamental that we aspire to, overtly or not."

Made quickly with latex house paint on plywood, Felici's portraits embrace the materials of traditional folk art, but the more contemporary influences of pop art and global advertising shape their content. That may be the reason why populist phenomena like MTV and Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Studios have purchased Felici's art for their corporate collections.

Despite references to more mainstream figures like the late Tupac Shakur, Felici claims a reverence for true outsider artists like Mose Tolliver and Howard Finster. Straddling the mainstream and folk camps, the artist is comfortable selling his work in folk galleries such as Austin's Yard Dog as well as through his own web site (www.pacof.com). He describes the Internet as an important new element in outsider art, a place where the young and self-taught are setting up shop and interacting.

However, some folk traditions can't be beat, like taking the art right to the people. Felici's biggest score to date owes to one lucky afternoon showing his paintings in a friend's Blue Star parking space. A writer for the *Texas Observer* wandered past, and the photos she snapped of Felici and his work appeared with a cover story on San Antonio's art scene. That issue made its way to the University of Iowa Press, whose editors took the trouble to find Felici and commissioned him to illustrate *Humor Me: An Anthology of Humor by Writers of Color*. What's the lesson? If you are hung up on categories like "insider" and "outsider," the joke is on you. ●



Humor Me: An Anthology of Humor by Writers of Color cover art by Felici