



Blood Eyes, John Smalls

Dwight Hayes

John Smalls

Art Asylum

by John Ewing

You probably don't know John Smalls and Dwight Hayes or their art. Both painters are young, new to San Antonio and African American. Until recently, those three factors might have conspired toward invisibility locally, but as these two artists develop their personal practice, the culture at large develops a wider social vision. Both artists have moved here to concentrate on their work, one seeking a lively scene and the other leaving one. In both cases, the art merges the personal and the social in distinct ways that are emphasized by seeing the two artists together.

Born in Philadelphia, John Smalls spent his teenage years in Las Vegas and El Paso. Largely self-taught, his commitment to art making has led him, by word of mouth, to San Antonio. "El Paso is a big city, but even if you try your best and put all your money up to make something happen, it won't. It's just one of those towns," says the twenty-one year old Small, who supports himself in San Antonio with screen-print design and computer graphics. Hard and lean, the muscular lines that course through

Smalls' fast-paced work remind us of something we take for granted. Making a mark is a radical act, fusing the personal with the social in a fundamental, irrevocable form. This powerful relationship is what gives graffiti its punch, an energy that is palpable in Smalls' iconic portraits.

"I'm influenced by music. When I'm smearing the charcoal and acrylic across the canvas with my fingers, it's like a dance. I start flowing with the materials and let it all come out," says Smalls, who confides that happiness and contentment do little to inspire his work. "When I'm agitated, have a lot on my mind, that's when I paint," says the artist, whose best work reveals this catharsis. *Blood Eyes* records painful, romantic betrayal. Cross uses the Christ figure to locate individual suffering within an indifferent society. "Now and then, I get discouraged. But something tells me to go to the store and get paints and what I need," says Smalls. "I got that thing that says 'this is me, this is who I am.'"

A little older, a little wiser, Dwight Hayes comes to art from

a different direction. A 29-year-old Army reservist and graphic designer for City Public Service, Hayes left Atlanta last year to "slow down a little bit" and focus on work that combines watercolor, conté crayon and pastel. However, the overlap of personal and social contexts is just as relevant. Like Smalls, the relationship reveals itself in Hayes' art making strategies. Methodical and labor-intensive, Hayes folds the paper surface of his paintings into a tight grid, then builds a mosaic of personal and socially conscious imagery on top of it. The works' delicate and complicated smolder is achieved by layering images with a clear, acrylic medium. Sometimes thirty to fifty deep, the transparent layers mingle but never quite merge, giving a floating complexity to colors and marks.

*Brovas on the Train* and *Tech 1200s* use the portrait format to evoke Atlanta's urban scene. DJ-styled hip-hop and trainside tag art are not only the social glue for this milieu, replicated in cities throughout the nation, but as Hayes notes, these social forms also record personal histories. The layering effect both diffuses individual images and infuses the overall surface with an almost organic liveliness, an apt visual metaphor for the multiple directions of urban youth culture. Other paintings carry titles like *Manhood*, *Tools and Religion* and *Anti-heroes y Al Jolson*. These pieces use collage, found objects and patchwork to construct mythic, cautionary parables with a backdrop of Black social history.



*Tech 1200s*, Dwight Hayes

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*Brovas on the Train*, Dwight Hayes

I reviewed Smalls and Hayes show when I saw it in August. The *San Antonio Current* was unable to publish the review due to timing and a space crunch. *The Juice*, a local publication with a young hip hop audience, did not respond. Coincidentally, as I wrote this story, the power elite of American art criticism (*The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*) were gathering in Austin for *Viewpoint 2000: Critical Mass*. The conference opened with the topic, "Art Criticism: A Personal Voice, or Social Vision."

Arts writers, novices and veterans, are vulnerable to the economic aspects of the profession. They can become reluctant to write "on spec", for free or about unknown artists. It's ironic this would influence people whose work is the investigation of art. Artists rarely produce on the condition that they get a show, be paid for it and have something published about the work. Even if they could, we might think less of the artist who placed such conditions on creativity. Writers could take a lesson from artists like Smalls and Hayes, for whom the social practice of art making begins inside and reverberates outward to audiences, critics and the rest of the world. To artists, "personal" might mean the very desire to make art and "social" the interaction of creative impulses which evolves into the act of an entire society communicating with itself.

