



Death of Marat (After David), 2006-2008, oil on linen, 96" x 58"

START

by Margaret Regan

The Lebowski Cycle
Joe Forkan
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UAMA

The first museum that painter Joe Forkan '89 ever visited was the University of Arizona Museum of Art — the UAMA.

He was a teenager at the time, a high school student in a rough part of Tucson. But he liked art, and one day he took himself to the museum.

"There was a beautiful Hopper on the wall," Forkan reminisced recently, just before the museum opened a major solo exhibit of his own work. "There was a Pollock, a Rothko."

Then he saw the Altarpiece from Ciudad Rodrigo, the museum's magnificent suite of 26 late-15th century Spanish paintings. The jewel-like works depict dramatic scenes from the Old Testament and the life of Christ. The aspiring young artist was spellbound.

"It was very inspirational," says Forkan, now a professor of art at California State University, Fullerton. "I'm sure those paintings are in there, somewhere, in 'The Lebowski Cycle.'"

The 15 large-scale oils of Forkan's "Lebowski Cycle," on view this summer at the museum, are unusual hybrids. They are part homage to the cult classic "The Big Lebowski," a favorite movie of Forkan's, and part re-interpretation of the old masters that Forkan loves. In the massive canvases, The Dude meets Caravaggio. And Titian and Rubens and Géricault.

"The paintings are layered narratives," the artist explains, "using masterpieces of European art and the film 'The Big Lebowski' as a starting point."

The Coen brothers' 1998 movie revolves around one slacker's quest to get restitution for a ruined rug. The paintings depict the movie's much-loved characters — Jeff Bridges as The Dude, John Goodman as Walter — in modern settings like a bowling alley or a California beach.

But in their size and sweep, in their grasp of the grand gesture, the paintings

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are as full of drama and tragedy as any old master's. They're a distillation of everything Forkan has learned about the art of the past.

"I've always appreciated that kind of work," Forkan says. "Their size, their level of effort, their big statements. I wanted to wrestle with big ideas in my own work."

Each of the Lebowski paintings shares themes, if not characters, with an old master painting. Forkan's "The Lamentation (After Rubens)," for instance, is a modern reworking of a Rubens painting from 1614 picturing distraught disciples and the Virgin Mary formally gathered around Christ's dead body.

Forkan's version depicts The Dude and Walter grieving on a California beach after the death of a friend, whose ashes have been unceremoniously deposited in a red coffee can. But the grief of the Lebowski characters is no less dignified than the sorrow of Rubens' saints.

"You're looking at Rubens or Titian or Caravaggio and trying to have a dialogue with them," Forkan says.

Apart from everything else, the paintings are beautiful. As Olivia Miller, the UAMA's curator of exhibitions and education, puts it, while fans of the movie might turn up to see how it can be used to interpret great works of art, "even those who have never seen the film will be entranced by Forkan's high technical mastery as a painter."

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Peter Paul Rubens, The Lamentation, 1614, oil on wood, 16" x 20.86"



The Lamentation (After Rubens), 2011, oil on linen, 72" x 40"



Joe Forkan

Jacob Chinn photo

As an art major at the University of Arizona, Forkan pursued two separate disciplines. He loved cartooning and had a regular strip in the Arizona Daily Wildcat. He also loved painting, though his taste for luscious narrative painting was out of sync with the art world of the late '80s.

"I was trying to find my own way," he says. "I've never been in the line of 'what's the big thing at the moment.'"

He found a mentor in David Soren, a Regents' Professor of classics and a Renaissance man who is both a distinguished archaeologist and a former professional tap dancer. Forkan took two wildly different courses from Soren: one in Roman archaeology and one in film history.

Worried that he needed to specialize in just one art genre, Forkan went to Soren for advice.

"I said, 'I want to do all these things, but they're telling me to just pick one,'" Forkan recalls. Soren considered a moment and then replied, "If you want to do it, just do it."

It was simple advice, but it was exactly what Forkan needed to hear at the time. It gave him the courage to follow his own double path.

After graduating with his B.F.A. in 1989, he syndicated his comic strip, "Staggering Heights" — a title that played on his own staggering height of 6 feet 7 inches — and freelanced as an illustrator, painting lavish cover art for the Tucson Weekly

and other publications. And he painted his own work feverishly, using "illustration to support my painting habit."

He went to graduate school after 10 years, choosing the University of Delaware for its offerings in color theory and the work of the old masters. After his M.F.A., he headed to Cal State, Fullerton, where he has ever since happily divided his teaching time between painting and illustration.

In California, Forkan painted what he saw out the window of his studio in Santa Ana, making 70 paintings in three years. "It was a huge education in light," he says. An early study of the southern California light made a splash with critics, and five of his rooftop paintings eventually made their way into the UAMA's permanent collection.

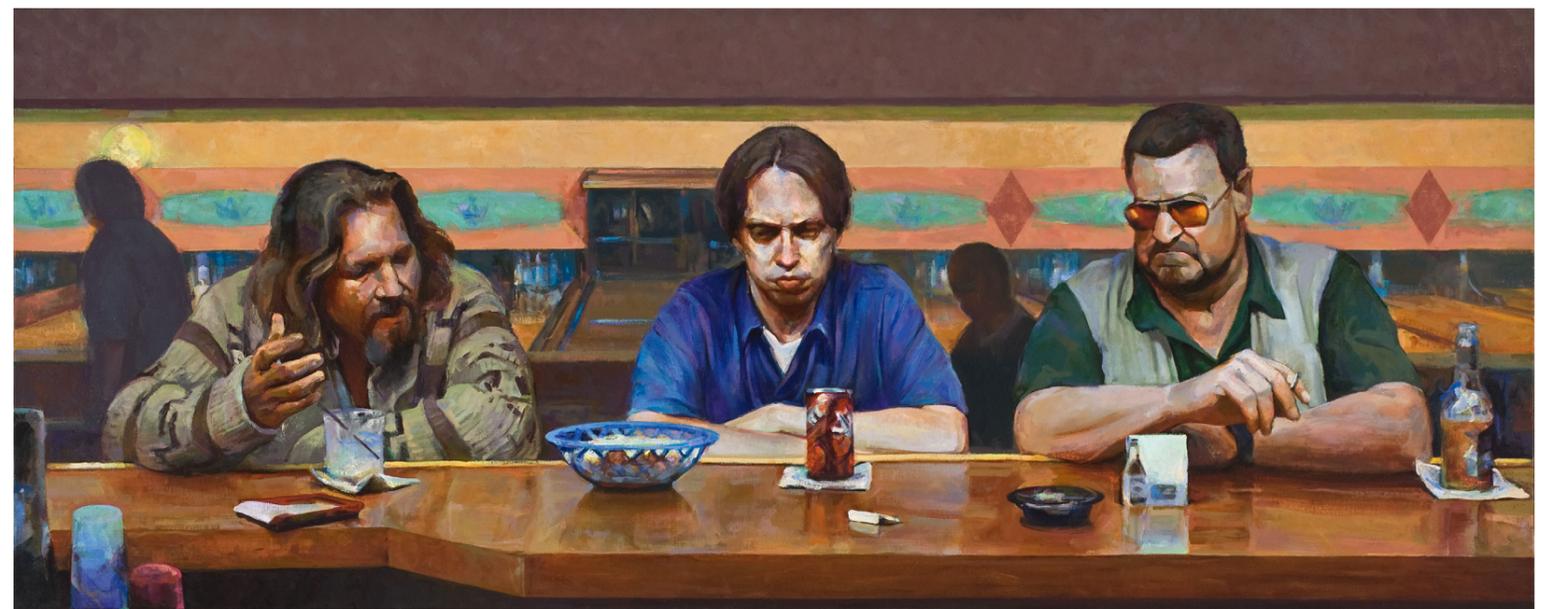


Venus, 2011, oil on linen, 72" x 50"



Baptism of Christ (After Carracci), 2011, oil on linen 24" x 38"

The series took about five years to complete. That's partly because of the size of the paintings — some are as large as eight feet by five feet — and partly because there were detours along the way.



Supper at Emmaus (After Caravaggio), 2006-2010, oil on linen, 96" x 38"

Around 2006, brooding about narrative and history painting, Forkan began to conceive his Lebowski project as an exercise in narrative and history painting. He picked the Coens' movie as his vehicle for an exploration of old master painting because "It's fun; it's visual. You can take a scene that is funny and that has heft too."

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Midway through the series, Forkan won an artist residency in Ballycastle, an Irish seaside town in County Mayo. The sojourn gave him the chance to spend two months painting outdoors, capturing sky, sea, cliffs and rainclouds in all lights and times of day. When he got back to Santa Ana, he was dismayed to see that the Lebowski paintings — painted in the studio, where he was looking at his sources online, in books and on screen

The finished suite of paintings has been exhibited at five other colleges.

— had taken on the suffocating tones of the indoors. Inspired by his time in Ireland, he ratcheted up the colors, bringing the light and air of California into the images.

The finished suite of paintings has been exhibited at five other colleges, including Suffolk County Community College in New York, which published a catalog. The UAMA staff first became aware of the work when the catalog unexpectedly arrived in the mail.

"We fell in love with the paintings," says Nathan Saxton, the museum's

exhibition specialist. "What attracted me the most is the intriguing way that Joe interwove scenes from 'The Big Lebowski' with narratives or imagery that appear throughout art history. As a result, the exhibition can be enjoyed and understood by a 'Big Lebowski' fan or an experienced museum visitor."

For his part, Forkan is thrilled to have the work at the University of Arizona.

"It's going to be really nice to see the work at my alma mater, hanging at the first museum I ever visited."



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas (After Caravaggio), need info and high Res. image.