

Interview with Joe Forkan

The Lebowski Cycle

20Minutos.es

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First of all. Who is Joe Forkan? Name, occupation, place and date of birth...

I was born in New York in 1963. I grew up in Tucson, Arizona. I have a BFA in Studio Art from the University of Arizona, and an MFA in Painting & Drawing from the University of Delaware.

I am currently an Associate Professor of Art at California State University Fullerton.

How would you define your work?

This body of work, *The Lebowski Cycle*, is a series of paintings and drawings I began in 2006, exploring the idea of layered narratives, using masterpieces of European art and the 1998 Coen Brothers' film *The Big Lebowski* as a starting point.

What do you want to express with it?

The work came out of a longstanding interest in narrative painting, particularly paintings from the Baroque and Neoclassical eras. I love those complex figurative works that depict grand story arcs, and manage to compress a multitude of thoughts, ideas and emotions into a singular image.

I wanted to explore human interactions and conflicts, formal structures, and modes of depiction that are operating in these paintings as much as the specific stories that are being depicted.

*Why did you choose *The Big Lebowski*?*

Well, first of all, I love the film, obviously. But I had been looking at a lot of narrative paintings. David's *Oath of the Horatii* was really the one that triggered the idea. I was thinking about the grand seriousness of this kind of painting, looking for a way to build a more open narrative – one that would not get stuck in a single reading, or be too grim, as this type of painting often is.

I started looking at *The Big Lebowski* as a possible source, trying to imagine how the great characters, playful humor, and preposterous story arc of the film might be enlisted to build some more layered narratives; paintings with multiple points of view, moods, and intentions.

However, the Coen brothers were already really working with layered genres and different archetypes in the film. They constructed a labyrinthine narrative in the manner of a Raymond Chandler novel, and replaced the hardboiled detective with an aging pothead. This gave them great storytelling possibilities, playing off of and to the

conventions of different genres. At one point, this leads to a Film Noir dream sequence filmed as a Busby Berkeley musical in a bowling alley with a character costumed from a Wagner Opera. If you get all the references, it's great, if not - it's still rich storytelling.

So, I wanted to use disparate sources and conventions to make hybrid images that reference art history, film, and contemporary art, creating a lot of ways to enter the work.

T-Bone Burnett, writing about working on the Coen Brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, said the tone of that movie was "epic and dead serious on the one hand and comic and affable on the other". I think I respond to that sensibility in the Coen brothers work, and that was really one of my goals for the series.

When was the first time you watched it?

I saw the movie in the theatre when it first came out, and I've owned a copy since it was released on DVD.

How many times did you see the film?

It wouldn't surprise me if I've seen the movie 100 times at this point. I've been working on this project for five years. In the beginning I would watch it over and over, looking for connections between images and ideas from the film and art history, plus really paying attention to the cinematography, environments, editing, etc.

Then there was the process of building the images to paint from. None of the images are straight screen shots. The characters are combined from different frames, elements are added, subtracted and compositions changed. The paintings are also a product of a slow process and an attention to some of the approaches used in creating the source paintings, so they tend to change in the studio as well.

Sometimes the film was just good company in the background while working in my studio.

Not many films would still hold up after that many viewings.

Lebowski is antihero while the classical paintings depict heroes, How do these two worlds fit into each other?

I think that the difference between the heroic figures in the religious and historical paintings and the dude at the bowling alley was part of what interested me. The fact that the characters in the film are dead serious about what is happening to them, and it is their *actions* that are funny, was another reason I liked it as a source. I liked that collision in the reading of the painting - the grand historical and the every day coming together in some way.

Are you planning to do something similar as The Lebowski Cycle with another movie?

Why?

Yes, I'm in the beginning stages of a couple of projects. I'm still really intrigued by the possibilities of working with these kinds of layered images.

Please, tell me about the technical aspects of your work.

Painting is really a strange and imprecise way of making images and conveying ideas if you think about it. I think that is part of its appeal to me. I think what makes art dynamic and engaging is how ideas and aesthetics interact in a piece of art. So, it was important to me that these weren't just illustrations of the idea, but were as visually rich and complex as I could make them. I used many different approaches from different eras in making the work.

The paintings are oil on linen, and all fairly large. The largest piece is 7 x 12 feet, but most are at least 6 feet in length. The scale was important. The source paintings were usually large scale and I wanted the presence and impact that large paintings have.

One of the things I love about living in this time is that there are so many ways of making images. This work is an attempt to navigate and explore many different approaches to making paintings and making images, and that is also part of what the paintings are about.