

# TUCSON WEEKLY

ARTS &amp; CULTURE » ARTS: FEATURE

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## The Dude Rules

Joe Forkan's Lebowski paintings at UAMA have the power (and aesthetics) of the Old Masters

By Margaret Regan



Imagine for a moment if Jesus had had no interest in being baptized.

What if the future savior hadn't want to step into the River Jordan? Or bow his head reverently while his cousin St. John the Baptist poured water on his head, as he does in the Annibale Carracci's 1584 oil "Baptism of Christ?"

Painter Joe Forkan imagined this very thing, or something a lot like it, in his "Baptism of Christ (After Carracci)," an oil on linen from 2011.

Forkan's Christ figure is The Dude from "The Big Lebowski," the 1998 cult film from the Coen brothers. The Dude is in a pink bathtub in a modern Los Angeles bathroom—and he fiercely resists his baptismal dunking in the tub's pastel-colored waters.

The bathtub painting is one of some 15 beautifully rendered oils on linen in Forkan's The Lebowski Cycle, a major solo show at the University of Arizona Museum of Art.

At first, Forkan's concept is startling. He's painted scenes from the movie, complete with dead-on portraits of its stars, Jeff Bridges, John Goodman and Steve Buscemi, haunting the bowling alleys, parking lots and swimming pools of down-and-out Los Angeles. And while the movie is a half-comic, half-tragic

### The Lebowski Cycle: Joe Forkan

Through Sept. 25  
University of Arizona  
Museum of Art, 1031 N.  
Olive Road  
9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday  
through Friday, with  
extended hours until 7 p.m.  
on Thursday. 9 a.m. to 5  
p.m. Saturday and Sunday.  
Closed Labor Day, Monday,  
Sept. 5.

\$8 general; \$6.50 for  
seniors age 65 and up; free  
for children, students, UA  
faculty and staff, museum  
members, military  
personnel, and visitors with  
SNAP card or tribal ID.

621-7567;  
[www.artmuseum.arizona.edu](http://www.artmuseum.arizona.edu)

Joe Forkan gives an artist's  
talk on at 5:30 p.m.,  
Thursday, Sept. 15. The  
lecture is included in the  
admission fee

tale about a soiled rug and a quest for justice, Forkan paints its scenes in the high-art style of old-master history paintings.

What's more, each painting is a reinterpretation of a particular classic work from the Baroque or Neo-Classical period. The Dude meets Caracci—and Caravaggio and Titian and Rubens.

Caravaggio's shadowy painting "The Taking of Christ" from 1602, just for example, is a dark vision of Roman soldiers seizing Jesus from the garden the night before he was crucified. (Each of Forkan's paintings is accompanied in the show by a small image of the master painting that inspired it.)

Forkan's version, "The Taking of Christ (After Caravaggio)," is set in a bowling alley. John Goodman, substituting for Caravaggio's armor-clad soldier, leans menacingly toward a worker and points a gun at his head. Bridges grabs the man's hands while Buscemi looks on in horror. The overhead fluorescents cast a painfully bright artificial light on the orange décor, but Caravaggio's darkness still hovers in the corners.

For the Carracci painting, Forkan introduced his own plot element: Jesus resisting his fate.

The paintings are mélanges of Hollywood noir and old-master paintings, "layered narratives," as Forkan calls them in an essay, which use "masterpieces of European art and...The Big Lebowski as a starting point."

Forkan, a UA art grad who grew up mostly in Tucson (and who used to paint lush covers for the Tucson Weekly as a freelance illustrator), says that he's always admired the grand history paintings of the past. His own style has often been slightly out of step with contemporary art, and when it came time to get his MFA, he went East to the University of Delaware in part so he could study the techniques of the Old Masters.

Now a full professor at Cal State Fullerton, Forkan has made a name for himself with his light-filled landscapes and architectural studies. The UAMA bought five of his paintings of the urban views from his loft studio in Santa Ana, a suite of geometric rooftops works that chart the changing colors in the changing California light.

With the Lebowski series, Forkan aimed to "wrestle with big ideas," combining the large scale and grand gestures of paintings of the past with a contemporary, even humorous story. In doing so, he gives weight to the marginalized characters lionized in Lebowski.

"The Death of Marat (after David)," huge at 8 feet wide and 6 feet high, recalls the stark 1793 Jacques-Louis David painting of the murdered French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat lying dead in his bath. Forkan pushes the pathos—and the water theme—by picturing his victim floating dead-drunk on a chair in a blue LA pool, his beer bottle riding the waves beside him. The man may not be dead, but he's bereft and vulnerable, an everyman trying to get through life's turbulent currents.

When it comes to an actual death in the movie, Forkan makes another large painting of tragic proportions. "The Lamentation (After Rubens)" is 6 feet wide, 3 ½ feet high. It echoes, tangentially, Rubens' 1614 painting of the Virgin Mary and the apostles grieving the death of Jesus. Rubens places Christ's body, already drained of color, on the ground, with a woman (Mary Magdalen?) and one of the apostles cradling his head. His mother kneels nearby, weeping into her hands as she gazes at her dead son. Jesus's ashen corpse slashes diagonally across the canvas, and the mourning figures are beautifully placed in a half-circle around him.

Forkan's painting is just as heartbreaking, and just as dignified. Goodman and The Dude are embracing on a California beach, against a backdrop of the sunny rocks and sparkling waters of the Pacific. They're distraught over the death of their friend, whose ashes are stashed in a humble red coffee can sitting on the sand. The two mourners are comically attired in plaid shorts, baggy T-shirts and sunglasses.

Forkan uses his painting to elevate the grief of these ordinary, flawed people, aligning it with the saints' lamentations over the body of the dead Christ. Every life matters, and so does every death.