

Skip Hill: Sacred Gumbo?  
by Romy Owens

I'm an unapologetic fan of Skip Hill's art which embodies a hip fusion of culture, content, and style that radiate both cleverness and maturity. And Skip is as radtastic as his art.

ro: So Skip, your first name is Robert, no? I am so curious about how you got the nickname Skip?

SH: That's right, my first name is Robert, which I always liked better than Skip. Needless to say, I took and gave a lot of ass whippings on the playground behind my nickname. But, my grandmother has told me that in those ancient days, before sonograms, I was called Skip even in my Mama's womb. The only people who call me Robert now are either telemarketers, or tellers at the bank.

ro: How long have you been arting?

SH: Before I even knew I was "arting," I was doing what came naturally with a pencil and a scrap of paper. I have a clear memory of copying Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles* with poster paints in second grade. I also remember lying on the floor in my grandmother's den, as I drew animals and watched the Watergate hearings on TV.

In elementary school, I was focused on cartoons and comic books which I created and sold to my classmates. At age eleven, I was featured in a half-page article in the Corpus Christi Caller Sunday Features section, which helped me believe that what I was doing was viable. It also gave me a sense of confidence to put up with the haters that constantly ragged on a brother at school!

I've focused on my current art practice, as a student and working artist, for about the last 15 years.

ro: Holy cow. I can totally envision seven-year-old Skip fastidiously copying *Bedroom at Arles*. This makes me want to ask about the series of paintings you created for City Arts Center this past summer. The theme for camp focused on folk tales, and the primary audience included the families with kids attending day camp. So, how did you pick your folk tales? And when

you participate in a project like this, do you have any hopes or expectations about how your art could inspire the artists of the future?

SH: Producing large-scale murals and conducting workshops for children has been a part of my art efforts for years, so I felt comfortable with the City Arts Center *Hands On* exhibit. I was selected by Clint Stone and Josh Buss because of my use of folk art as a source of inspiration in my studio work. We wanted to incorporate some tales that children were familiar with, like Pecos Bill and John Henry as well as stories from different cultures that are perhaps not as well known, such as the Japanese story of Momotaro the Peach Boy, and the Cherokee tale of the Bear Clan.

I had the good fortune of having a 14-year-old artist named Candace on hand for a couple of weeks, to help create the environments in the gallery. She was quietly confident and usually had a book in her hand and a funky hat covering her curly blonde hair. She was eager to help, listened carefully and asked thoughtful questions. I simply gave her some directions, some encouragement and told her that I trusted her gift. I can only hope she will be inspired to follow her talent, but even if she becomes engineer or a veterinarian, I'm sure she will always have an appreciation of art and creativity. My concern is for those kids who don't have the support at home or school for their artistic nature. I was contracted by the Oklahoma City Museum of Art to get the word out in the African-American community about the Harlem Renaissance exhibition, and it was clear to me that outreach, education and information is the key to increasing awareness of the enriching power ART can bring to their lives.

ro: Would you mind sharing a little bit about your background? Where you grew up, schooling, career path, etc.

SH: Born at the Naval Air Station at Padre Island, near Corpus Christi, Texas.

My father was in the Marine Corp, my mother was a beautiful honey brown girl who sang with a popular girl group that performed locally. They divorced when I was six or seven and I struggled with that loss well into adulthood. Immersing myself into the fantastic world of books and comics, I'm sure was an unconscious effort to escape the reality of my family life as we moved from Texas, to California, to Texas, to Florida, back to Texas, then to Tennessee, before arriving in Oklahoma in the early seventies.

At home I had practically no exposure to art, but at about eight-years-old I visited my father for the summer. He collected lithographs and art posters, and turned me on to African Art, the Harlem Renaissance and artists like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. He also had a library filled, floor to ceiling, with art catalogs, books and books and books. I discovered Afro-centric books, autobiographies of Fredrick Douglas, Malcolm X and W.E.B. Dubois. I fingered the pages of obscure metaphysical books like The Urantia Book and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I was amazed by the hyper-saturated color plates of Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield in the Bhagavad Gita. He bought me oil paints, mediums and stacks of canvas board and encouraged me to create something every day. After that, I didn't see him until I was a teenager. But he always greatly encouraged my art.

Still, I thought being a cartoonist or illustrator was as good as it could get. I graduated from Del City High School without taking a single art class. In hindsight, I'm sure I missed some opportunities early on in my career because of that decision.

I attended Oklahoma City University majoring in Advertising / Marketing, when it became clear that my folks weren't going to fund four years of study at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. I produced award-winning political cartoons for the student newspaper, The Campus, before dropping out after three semesters.

I worked in advertising for years as an Illustrator and Graphic Designer (pre-Macintosh). I relocated to California about 1987 with my girlfriend at the time and struggled to make a living freelancing. After that relationship ended, I spent most of my time lost, down, and out in Tijuana, beginning years of wanderlust.

I traveled to Thailand, and after a period of drunken, half out of my mind, self-indulgent grief, I found a job as a writer correspondent for an English language business magazine, interviewing representatives from multi-national corporations doing business in Thailand. I produced illustrations and designed advertising as well.

While in Bangkok, I fell in love with an incredible woman and a year or so later I was living with her in The Netherlands. It was there that I began creating art for art's sake for the first time since perhaps childhood. I made

art practically everyday, studied art history, visited galleries and some of the great museums of Europe.

While there I managed to pick up the Dutch language, have several gallery shows, got some media play and received lots of commissions. I traveled throughout Germany, to Czechoslovakia and Prague, to Morocco and Essaouira.

Eventually, I returned to the States, and Oklahoma, where I studied Fine Art at OU under Edgar Hachivi Heap of Birds and George Bogart.

I have designed sets for the theater, illustrated children's books as well as produced murals and installations in public and private spaces. I have shown my work in New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, and of course in Tulsa and OKC.

Today my paintings are in private collections on both sides of the Atlantic.

ro: Wow. So this series of events has clearly influenced your art with a cultural diversity of international scale. But before I ask about your art, I wonder if you won't go back a little bit. Your dad was supportive in encouraging your art, and you've always been artistic, however, you mentioned that there was a point in your teen years when you thought being a cartoonist or illustrator was as good as it could get (not to imply there is anything wrong with being a cartoonist or illustrator), and that you never took art in high school. How did this disconnect occur? Do you think this still happens with teens today? Can you offer any solutions as to how to encourage teens to pursue careers in art? Is it a failing of parents or the education system or does it speak to self-esteem in teenagers?

SH: The disconnect occurred for me with a lack of exposure to art beyond the imagery I found in popular culture at the time, which was mostly Saturday morning cartoons, Disney animation, comic strips and Marvel and DC comic books. Because drawing and reproducing objects from life came easy to me, I thought I had all I needed to be a successful artist. I seem to recall someone asking me in jr. high school "What do you need to take art for? You already know how to draw!"

I realized later how much I didn't know and what I missed from some formal instruction as far as art history, art processes, the various media and

techniques. I meet teens today who have beautiful, raw artistic talent but they may have esteem issues (like many teenagers) and a lack of awareness of the power and opportunities they have in their hands. They usually come from humble circumstances in households where art is not appreciated and they are encouraged by their family to pursue something serious that can get them a job and a secure future... you know how that works.

Based on my own experience, it's crucial that parents recognize their children's gifts, whether it be music, writing or art and take responsibility for fostering those gifts. Even if parents know nothing about painting or sculpting or crafting poetry, they should put their children's gifts in the care of someone who does. As far as the education system, I've been in some public schools that do a great job with the resources they have, and others that have a limited amount of time devoted to art education and actual studio practice. It's a matter of a school boards' priorities and values, I suppose.

ro: On to your art. You have a style that is very much your own. Will you describe the evolution of your art?

SH: For years, It was a process of studying and drawing from others whose art spoke to me on some profound, subconscious level. Initially, I copied those artists whose myth, art style, career or fame attracted me (see: Jean Michel Basquiat). But at some point, you have to grow past that level of straight up mimicry and make your own way, which can be scary. What if you have nothing to say?

Like cooking a gumbo, I've used a bit of this artist, a bit of that culture's iconography or conceptual approach as I struggled to develop my own artistic voice and vision. In my current aesthetic, I'm interested in the blending of high and low culture, at the confluence of language, myth, sexuality, pop culture, history, identity, race and gender. The Boxer Series wall sculptures, for example, inspired by cartoons, graffiti, African fetishes and Southern Folk art, as well as Japanese Nioh temple guardians and the formal flatness of Byzantine art.

ro: I totally dig the reference to gumbo. It's a poignant way of describing multiple influences which develop into your own. So, who are some of your favorite artists? And please give a little insight as to why.

SH: The old school notables would include comic book artist and writer, Jack Kirby for his unique perspective, Romare Bearden's use of collage and affirmative black imagery; Willem De Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly just because. There's Pablo and Jean-Michel, of course. I love the conceptual work of David Hammons, the sculpture of Martin Puryear, the hip-hop baroque paintings of Kehinde Wiley, and how each of them synthesize European and African aesthetics into a uniquely American art.

I'm also a huge fan of Petah Coyne's vulnerable, graceful sculptures and how they manage to convey loss, death, regeneration and renewal.

ro: There is a film called *Transcend* in which you are one of five featured artists. For the *ArtFocus* readers who are unfamiliar, will you describe the documentary?

SH: *Transcend : 5 Black Artists by 5 Black Artists*, is the brainchild of artist/curator Nathan Lee of Inclusion In Art, who wanted to present a revealing look into the personal, creative and socio-political lives of five African-American artists actively practicing their craft in the heart of Red-State-America. We recently got our first look during a private screening at Living Arts in Tulsa.

*Transcend* is a very compelling film that looks at an aspect of art in a context absent from most art discussions. It's going to create quite a buzz once it premieres.

ro: By the time this interview is published, *Transcend* will have premiered in Oklahoma City. What do you mean that this film looks at an aspect of art in a context absent from most art discussions?

SH: I'm speaking on a local level about the presence and viability of African-American artists creating in Oklahoma. I haven't seen a project like this, that gathers a group of Black artists who are plugged into the Oklahoma arts community, (I met Nathan Lee and Suzanne Thomas through OVAC) who also have unique issues we encounter in finding an audience and collector base that is receptive to what we do.

ro: What are your thoughts on the documentary process?

SH: I liked that there was no scripting, no rehearsals, no formal agenda or viewpoint we had to hold to other than our own. Our discussions and responses were spontaneous. The director just let the cameras roll and let us be who we are and talk about what we experience.... as artists, as Americans in the Age of Obama, as black folks, as bi-racial single mother, as gay, black male in an interracial marriage, as straight, married male with children, etc.

ro: One of the things you mentioned in *Transcend* is that artists need to make art less intimidating. Please explain.

SH: Let me say up front, that as a relative insider and art aficionado I can appreciate the often cliquish, intellectually insolated culture of certain aspects of the fine art universe. I'm an unrepentant art junkie. I like galleries and museums. I like art magazines. I like art lingo. I like openings, the hype, the next big thing, the gossip, the criticism, ruminating over a glass of wine or a Guinness Draught on postmodern theory, painterly technique or conceptualizing about an artist's intentions... I'm digging all of that. It's a world I can swim deep in without drowning, because I can see it in perspective to a greater picture called "The Scheme of Things."

But as long as art (in the Western Euro-centric tradition) is considered by the majority of our community as incomprehensible, unapproachable, elitist and removed to its rarified ethers among a thin segment of us insiders, and away from being personally relevant to the heart and spirit of a greater portion of that community; then Art can hardly expect to rally more than a shrug when we call on the broader community to support or to appreciate what we artists feel passionately about and need to share.

ro: I love gossip. Have you heard any good gossip lately that you want to share?

SH: I rather not put anyone on blast in *ArtFocus*, but let's have a drink and you can tell me what you got...

ro: Fair enough. I had to try. So, where can your art be seen right now?

SH: Locally, I'm represented at JRB Art at the Elms Gallery, where I currently have a selection of mixed-media collaged original works available

to collectors. I encourage people to contact the gallery and arrange to see them in person.

*Tattoo (Amina)*, a large collage painting from 2005, and one of the "Le Boxer" paintings are at Mainsite Gallery in Norman.

In Chicago, you can visit the Judy Saslow Gallery in the River North District and ask Madison to show you two of my more sculptural pieces from the "Le Boxer" series.

Of course people can check out my website [skiphill.moonfruit.com](http://skiphill.moonfruit.com) and find me on facebook (Robert Hill) and myspace (skiphillart).

*romy owens is an artist based in Oklahoma City. She can be reached via mental telepathy or through her website [romyowens.com](http://romyowens.com).*