

# The Man Who Would (Not) Be King

By Bill Braine

It's hard not to impute ironic intent to Mission-based artist El Rey; after all, his works often seem to be a sly subversion of the seriousness with which the art world takes itself. In a published artist's statement, the painter even describes his *nomme de canvas* as a self-deprecating label. Stand with the art, however, and the apparent self-consciousness collapses for one simple reason: his pictures are just too good. El Rey is a reluctant monarch, but clearly a master of many subjects.

Populated by monkeys, robots, roots-country singers, and ubiquitous, unearthly cups of coffee, his realm lies firmly within the borders of 20th-century America — the same land and time that brought us the world's largest ball of twine, the Atari 800, Velveeta, the Carter Family, Spam, the Cadillac, and, yes, Andy Warhol.

It's not schlock art, though. The coffee he likes to paint — full caff, and served in a steak-and-potatoes, white-ceramic, eight-ounce chophouse-style cup — speaks volumes. El Rey doesn't fuck with coffee. He feels free to fuck with his own feelings about coffee, though, and paints the sacred cup with a worshipper's eye: it floats as a phantom in the desert, glides through outer space, morphs into an addict's-dream “foot long” serving. But with an honest cup of joe at its core, El Rey's *oeuvre* only flirts with irony.

He traffics in icons, often removing his subject from anything but a graphic-design-inspired single-color background. The absence of context, one senses, might be an attempt to place a magnifying lens over a single absurdity — “Hey, lookit this smarmy cartoon spokesperson you probably never noticed before!” — but he renders his prints and paintings with such an eye for color, and with such a rabid joy, that the works themselves are powerfully mood-inducing and thought-provoking. Sincerity sometimes clambers through in subject choice, as well: in a rumpled Ernest Tubb, or a frighteningly hearty Bob Wills, or an impassioned James Brown. These are not grinning Ronald Reagans, but actual heroes.

Absurdist textual elements are often present, riffing on advertising clichés or evoking schoolyard humor (an infatuation with the word “pants” won't be denied), and while the resulting material gnaws at the foundations of capitalist hucksterism, it is also undeniably ad-like. An exhortation to “Ask for Pughead,” for instance — under, well, a pug's head — begs for translation as advertisement. *Exactly what are we being asked to buy, here?* The question lies just beneath the image surface, and sticks.

An El Rey is an education, a guide to the way iconography is formed, what it stands for, and whether to care about it. Maybe it *is* art for the bathroom, as the artist might claim (don't forget that Archimedes was in the tub when he had his εὐρηκα!), but it is also a small inoculation against the power of symbol. Each experience with El Rey is veritable, visual, visceral; despite an apparent wish to go nude, this Emperor actually has clothes. ♡

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