

LOW DOWN ART

BY STEVEN DEVADANAM
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BLUE-EYED WONDER: The artist in his River Oaks loft. Right: Blue-Eyed Marionette.

STAY TOONED *The incredible true story of a local artist who was just looking for a creative outlet and ended up on Hollywood's radar*

If Travis Hedemann makes it really big in the art world, he'll owe someone a very big thank-you: *The Smurfs*.

"I used to watch these great 'toons when I was a kid," Hedemann recalls fondly. "*The Smurfs*, *Bugs Bunny*—you know, they're what made the '80s Saturday morning cartoons." But one day, Smurfs, bunnies and other classics disappeared, and suddenly, kiddie programs became cold and computerized. Disappointed but inspired, Hedemann was on a mission: "I wanted to create the kind of work they just weren't showing anymore."

And so, our young artist—who's never even had a solo gallery show in Houston—is now painting portraits for Hollywood celebs.

Okay, so it wasn't *that* simple. Hedemann, 31, barely dabbled in art in high school. At the University of St. Thomas, he majored in business, figuring he'd get into real estate. But the passionate art enthusiast—who cites giants such as Lichtenstein and Koons as inspiration—couldn't shake the creative bug. So in his mid-20s, he began painting vibrant, cartoony images of cutesy animals, Hollywood icons and even sexy women—all with trademark big, blue eyes—with an almost computerized sense of detail and precision.

What happened next reads like a story scripted for Hollywood. Thanks to a charmed life or just straight luck, Hedemann's work found its way to noted collectors, gallery owners and A-listers including Courtney Cox, Reese Witherspoon, Adam Sandler and Samuel L. Jackson. It started when neighbor and noted über-collector Don Sanders ordered some devilishly cute nudes for himself and cuddly animal pieces for his grandson and nephew after seeing Hedemann's work in the hallway of their River Oaks mid-rise. "He has an approach that I've never seen before," says Sanders, who owns arguably the largest collection of "Blue Dog" pieces by George Rodrigue and compares Hedemann to the iconic artist.

An avid and frequent traveler, Hedemann later found support away from home. A trip to Aspen led him to the Art Expo in Las Vegas, where he was discovered by two West Coast gallery owners who later showed his work. Through connections with celebrity gift agencies and endorsement managers, Hedemann was soon painting gift pieces for Cox, Sandler and, most recently, Brad and Angelina (who, with obvious recent news, have been a tad busy and have yet to see Hedemann's personalized paintings—one for each child). At a chance meeting, Frank Sinatra Jr. was so impressed with Hedemann's spot-on depiction of Ol' Blue Eyes that he bought the portrait of his father and has decreed it be placed in the future Sinatra Museum, set to open in Palm Springs or Las Vegas.

All that celebrity exposure led to an invitation to the recent TV Land Awards, where Hedemann showcased his works to admiring actors, including Jackson, who playfully demanded a piece while perusing Hedemann's Hollywood series. "I rushed home, turned that painting around and got it to him in no time," says Hedemann with a laugh.

Hedemann's fanbase isn't solely in Hollywood. Edward Montgomery Waznis, owner of Edward Montgomery Fine Art in Carmel, lays lofty praise on Hedemann's work, calling him a "person of interest in the ongoing investigation into the direction of fine art in the 21st century." But celebrity endorsement manager Barry Greenberg, who has helped Hedemann connect with the stars, won't be surprised to see Tinseltown come knocking.

"If *The Simpsons* calls him up, he should be ready," says Greenberg, noting that *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening was once a struggling artist: "Think of it this way—how would you like to have a couple of Groening's early pieces on your wall?" For information, visit www.younggetheartart.com. ■

