

The Real Work

Intro: Chattanooga artist Matthew Dutton can turn an object or idea into art that is lovely, nostalgic, and sometimes, deeply creepy.

Perched on a side table is a teddy bear with devilish horns and human hands. Halfway up a wall is a scalded porcupine with a babydoll face beside a mounted deer head in a vintage Santa mask. Matthew Dutton's sculptures can stir up nostalgia, wonder, fear, or all of the above — and that's before they start moving.

"A lot of the parts are animated," Matthew explains. "I plug them in and they talk."

If that makes you uncomfortable, it wouldn't displease Matthew. His work elicits a wide variety of responses, and he appreciates them all.

He recently exhibited his newest installation, *Midnight Paracosm*, in the Stephen Romero Gallery in Brooklyn. Later this year, his work will travel to San Diego, Santa Monica, Oregon, and Australia, but for now, *Midnight Paracosm* is living in the lobby of an arthouse theater in Chattanooga's Southside.

When asked to compare the way his art is received in Chattanooga to the way audiences respond elsewhere, Matthew focuses on population ratios.

"I've had a lot of great reactions here in Chattanooga," he says. "But when you get to a bigger city, the population variance is so much higher that there will be more folks who gravitate to a certain kind of work."

For example, there was his display at Chattanooga's 4 Bridges Arts Festival: "I had kids who were freaked out, and kids who would run up and tell me it's amazing. I love the duality of creating something that can be repulsive and attractive at the same time, depending on who's viewing it."

Matthew's craftsmanship can be found in surprising places around Chattanooga. For years, he worked at Rock City, maintaining and building outdoor displays.

"Being in the caves around all these antique gnomes and fairyland figures — it's amazing," he says. "At first I was just painting and doing 2D work. Then as I started building physical sculptures and things like that, it rolled into my own work."

Matthew now spends his daylight hours as a display coordinator for Anthropologie.

"It allows me to mess around with other materials, like gold leaf and paper — the other end of the spectrum," he says, noting he enjoys the Jekyll-and-Hyde contrast between his day job and

nightly projects. “Today, I made this beautiful piece of furniture, and tonight I’ll go make silicone skin on a cadaver. It’s a good balance.”

Midnight Paracosm demonstrates Matthew’s ability to convert anything into art material. That includes found objects, paintings, trophies, and other relics of childhood, along with his own joys and tragedies.

While the parts are important, the whole is greater. Matthew defines the word paracosm as “a world you invent to help you cope.” Together, the many nostalgic pieces of Midnight Paracosm become that world for Matthew.

“Most everything in my work has some kind of direct reference to my life,” he says.

When the sculptures talk, it’s always the recorded voice of Matthew’s three-year-old son. And there are ever-present references to his sister, who was killed when she was 4 years old by a tree crashing into their mother’s home. Some references are obvious -- like a newspaper obituary -- and others are more obscure: for example, a cage that holds a baby doll atop a pillar.

“The pillar is maternal, and the doll is my sister,” Matthew says. “She was always in my mom’s mind. My mom recently passed, so I’m in the process of cleaning out her house, and there are photos of my sister everywhere. It’s intense, and I’ve had to figure out how to deal with it.”

Matthew’s work is about sifting through loss, but it also reflects happy changes and new connections in his life. His earliest years were spent in Florida, surrounded by woods and water. When his parents divorced, he moved away from his wild playground and lost contact with his father. Now, they’re back in touch, and Matthew has returned with his own son to the place he grew up. That homecoming has stimulated what he calls *rewilding* in his newest work, which looks like a 20th-century living room overrun by mythological creatures.

“It’s an expression of my youth in this wild and domestic setting,” he says.

While the momentous moments of Matthew’s life are heavily reflected in his installations, so too are the moments in between -- because Matthew exists in a permanent creative cycle. Never sketching his artistic plans, but always scheming, he spends his extra time stockpiling images, objects, and emotions for midnight: when the workday is done, his family is asleep, and the real work begins.