



Cultural Revolution

Painter Keith Doles works in vibrant color and active compassion

If there's one thing local artist Keith Doles is good at, it's making a living through art. He's a freelance commercial graphic designer, an adjunct professor at the local DeVry University campus, and he teaches floral and landscape painting workshops at Michael's craft store on the City Station Drive in Jacksonville. Doles has exhibited his paintings all over Northeast Florida, accepts commissioned portraits and even constructs impressive wood and aluminum assemblages. He's a jack-of-all-trades, yes, but also a kick-ass painter.

Born and raised on Jacksonville's Northside, Doles has decided to follow his passion — no matter what that entails. The now 32-year-old grew up spending a lot of time around his family — especially his grandmother — and formed his artistic approach “based on observances.” Doles graduated from the University of North Florida with a BFA in graphic design and went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in business from Webster University, where he learned how to incorporate marketing strategies into his art career. He wrote his thesis about the visual arts and its socioeconomic influence on the people of Jacksonville.

Doles was always an artistic kid, but didn't take art or painting seriously until attending UNF. There, he was inspired by the work of Jacob Lawrence, a “dynamic cubism” painter influenced by the shapes and colors of Harlem. Doles was asked to choose an artist to emulate and looked to Lawrence's use of flat, geometric shapes and color. He also studied French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne and his geometric work with cylinders, spheres and cones. “I wanted to see the distortion of reality and look beyond the obvious,” Doles explains.

In 2005, after receiving his masters, Doles suffered a left wrist injury (he's left-handed) and

underwent surgery that made painting and drawing difficult. So he started to revive his childhood-style of wild, vivid colors and vigorous brushstrokes.

In Doles' “Street Scenes” series, his childhood use of dramatic colors and the influence of masters like Lawrence and Cézanne are obvious. In 2004, he produced his first chapter in the series, influenced by stories and photos his grandmother shared with him. “The Marketplace,” “Bus Stop” and “Happy Hour” depict a life that happened decades before Doles was born — one taken from the pages of his elders. They're simple and beautiful and show a young artist searching for his own voice by listening to the past.

In “Street Scenes II,” painted mostly in 2007 and '08, Doles adds social and political commentary to his pieces. “Some of it's direct, some of it's subtle,” he explains. He concentrates

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on modern themes like the information age, national poverty and the widening gap between the lower and upper classes, evident in Doles' “The Line” (acrylic on panel), which features a struggling mom and child walking up to a long line of people at City Rescue Mission. In another work, “Man-Made Jungle,” a dozen people go about their day with cell phones glued

to their ears — concrete skyscrapers and dollar signs billowing above.

“I see so many homeless and unemployed people in Jacksonville,” the artist explains. “I see how [others] just ignore them.” But Doles doesn't want to be a cynic. Growing up, he was taught to find a balance between “the negative and positive things going on,” so he's concentrated on downtown Jacksonville's art scene for his most recent body of work, “Street Scenes III.”

An example of Doles' use of this balance and rhythm can be seen in his appropriately titled painting, “Art Walk” (acrylic on paper) at his site (keithdoles.com.) In it, an eclectic mix of progressive revelers and street performers mill about the street. They're painted in bright purples, electric greens and magentas — a premeditated use of color “for psychological and emotional purposes,” Doles says, “I do it so some of my serious works don't seem as dark or depressing.”

The metamorphosis of each series is a combination of a deliberate awareness and Doles' organic evolution as an artist. Yet while Doles' work and themes have evolved, his process has stayed much the same. Doles takes a camera and sketchbook around town, snaps photos and constructs paintings based on photographs, sketches and memory. He's currently a regular contributor at The Art Center Coop Gallery and The Art Center II and has a show coming up next year at the Jacksonville Arboretum and Gardens, “A Brush with Nature.” For now, Doles is working to bring real issues to the forefront. “I've been doing this series for six years and it seems to me like the gap between the rich and the poor keeps growing.” □

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