



# Art Daybook: A beautifully patriotic dunce

By Molly Glentzer | July 4, 2017 | Updated: July 6, 2017 7:19am



Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle



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"There are two sides of me as an artist: Nature at its grandest and man at his worst," painter John Alexander said.

**The piece:** "Raven Maniac"

**The artist:** John Alexander

**Where:** Recently at McClain Gallery

**Why:** Beaumont native John Alexander, who has lived and worked in New York since the late 1970s, has always painted lush landscapes that are always more than just pretty. Birds are a signature, too, and characters in dunce caps.

"There are two sides of me as an artist: Nature at its grandest and man at his worst," Alexander said recently at the Rice University printing studio. "I've always had, like, split personalities with my art. One is that I'm very concerned with the grandeur and beauty of nature: I love to

garden and be around nature. So I work on that and try to make it as beautifully romantic and spiritually motivated as I can. The other personality is that I look at hypocrisy and deceit and dishonesty and greed, and I do another kind of art which is politically satirical and hopefully has some kind of social content to it."

He held three paintbrushes of different sizes between the fingers of one hand as he spoke, deftly dipping the brush in his other hand into puddles of red and blue paint and swiping them onto a metal plate.

The image was upside down at one point and backwards the entire time, about to become a monoprint after it was run through the studio's big press.

He was remaking "Raven Maniac," a portrait-like image he first created in 2007 of a scruffy bird in a suit, with a flag wrapped around the dunce cap on its head.

"Edgar Allen Poe represents this or that," he said, referring to the great American writer and his famously ominous "The Raven," about an encounter with a demon-eyed bird — the poem that gave rise to that now-cliched phrase, "Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'"

Alexander said the duality and darkness of works by the late-18th- and early-19th-century Spanish master Goya, the late-19th-century French satirist Honore Daumier and the early-20th-century Ashcan school painters have always been inspirations, too.

Alexander, who hasn't lost his Texas accent, talks with the friendly ease of someone who makes listeners feel they've known him forever. And he can talk up a storm. Artist Karin Broker, who was running the studio that day, urged him to keep painting, so the print could be pulled before the layers of color dried.

Whatever else it might have represented in 2007, "Raven Maniac" looks pretty timeless. And timely.

*Bookmark Gray Matters. It's always had, like, split personalities.*



Photo: McClain Gallery



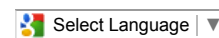
John Alexander's "Raven Maniac," from 2007, is an oil painting on paper.

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