

Rene Capone – Artist Profile

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

There is something slightly jarring about meeting Rene Capone for the first time. Like most artists whose work spills over with passion, pain, and moody evocation, you can't help but have a tiny expectation that the person will somehow be the physical embodiment of such emotion – a tortured, brooding, dark visage cloaked in furrowed brows and mumbling some incoherent statements of genius. Mr. Capone is instead a small, slightly waiflike wisp of a creature, with a ready smile and sparkling, animated eyes – thoughtful behind delicately-framed glasses.

Dressed in a simple T-shirt and low-cut jeans, he sets a casual scene in his home, which doubles as a studio. On a side street in SoMa, the room is filled with early afternoon light. The beginning stages of sketches rest on a low table. Framed work hangs on the walls, ready for an exhibition. It is an ideal location, with the vibrant SoMa scene just down the street, providing the perfect backdrop for an artist like Capone, and it's a long way from his origins in upstate New York.

“Being a young child in New York state was a nightmare. But in high school I learned to be me no matter what. I came out in high school in a small town, so I took a stance and stuck to it. I was that rebel fag that goes around wearing way too much eye make-up. I gave up the eye make-up but I'm still a problem child at heart.”

Finding San Francisco was like coming home. SoMa is its own living, breathing work of art – the streets, bars, and clubs have maintained their cool cachet in spite of growing gentrification. “It's surprisingly quiet, but if you're looking for noise you can certainly find it,” Capone maintains. “The best bars and clubs are in the Soma district. Living in San Francisco is very inspiring because it is a place where people are sort of given a license to do and be whomever they want. I love interesting people so that gives me a lot of inspiration.”

San Francisco ~ with its chaotic cast of characters and their wonderfully wacky stories ~ has long been a haven for creative types. The city and its moods are as variable as the fog, and its colorful history and ongoing development provide a fitting canvass for artists of all sorts. Capone's method is a natural, unforced one.

“It starts with an idea,” he begins. “Then I start looking for imagery and slowly start developing the paintings in my head. Then I make sketches, and lastly I start the painting. Most of the work happens in my head before it physically happens.”

In the studio where he works, there is stillness and quiet – both evoking a sense of peace and contemplation – a moment ripe for pause and reflection on his working process, and all that has gone into where he is today.

This year marks a milestone in Capone’s life journey. “Roughly ten years ago I sold my first painting,” he says. “It was a big deal back then, and it still is now. The idea that my artwork holds up enough merit to be included in other peoples lives, other than my own, is very important and special to me.”

In the past decade, Capone has grown as an artist and a man, and in that evolution is a deeper understanding of how his art fits into the world, and what that means. He is thoughtful when discussing his take on the value of art in today’s world. “I learned that stories and imagery are the most important thing that we as people have to give to each other and those after us.”

His latest exhibit is a switch from previous projects, featuring a main character – Hedgehog Boy – who explores the realm of fantasy, of the nether region between the sane and the insane – the time when a person delves into their darker thoughts, abandoning reason and convention, and stepping off the precipice of what’s normal. Like his artistic protagonist, Capone also goes further than he has in any of his previous work.

“The show is a big turning point for me as I’ve never made a character and focused so much on him before,” he explains. “There will also be a few paintings that are not of Hedgehog boy, but they are similar in tone, so I think they belong. It’s the story of an outsider, who goes even farther outside by slipping into insanity, a rather fun and sexy insanity, but still fucking nuts. I’ve always been fascinated by the idea that one could get lost within their own mind. Hedgehog boy is what happens when one falls too deep within themselves.”

These are heady themes, and Capone’s work deftly conveys the drama at hand. The pieces for his Hedgehog series are vibrant, bold, seering – utilizing rich pigments and in-your-face bursts of color and rough strokes. Magentas, deep blues, and traces of blood red punctuate the color scheme – entire backgrounds are soaked in hot fuschia and red-tinged violets, while indigo and dark cobalt add a cooling, grounding base.

In a candid confession, Capone reveals that his use of bold colors is not merely out of preference, but necessity: “The truth is I’m a little color-blind and I use rich deep colors because I see them better. I have a lot of trouble with telling color apart and in some cases seeing something that is not even accurate, so I try to use colors vivid enough so I can know what I’m doing.”

Though it’s hard to believe that someone who is color-blind can utilize color so masterfully, it also goes a way in explaining some of his more daring choices. Even so, as much as his use of color charges head-first into the viewer’s sight, there is distance too. In many of his pieces, the gaze of the subject is away from the viewer, lending both an intimacy and a sense of distance. When someone’s looking away, it’s easier to study and watch them – and Capone deftly draws the viewer in accordingly. It’s an exhilarating juxtaposition, giving his work an unstable tension and drama.

The idea of contrast is a constant in Capone’s work, and parallels the disparity of the diminutive young man and his powerful strokes of confident color.

“All the pieces in the show deal with dual identity and conflict of one’s character...and how people deal with trauma. Hedgehog boy is actually a very complicated character in what appears to be a simple story, and it’s far from original, but that’s the point. I want tell the story of someone who escapes from reality, completely unaware from the context that he is gay.”

Whereas the Hedgehog Boy pieces reveal what happens when a person pushes the edge and breaks the boundaries, Capone finds stability in executing his artistic vision, and a cathartic element through his painting.

He admits, “If I ignore my artwork, I notice everything I hold in balance starts to get shaky. I think I would be consumed by own thoughts if I did not paint.”

That sort of destructive consumption is realized in his Hedgeboy character, and it’s that destruction which Capone keeps so brilliantly at bay through his art. For the moment, Capone is focused on the here and now.

“I can’t think too much about the future imagery because my focus is on my current work. I always think that if I make the paintings the rest will fallow, and it always does.”

In the bright quiet of his studio, he contemplates some of the work to be featured. After ten years, it’s time to enjoy the moment.