

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Chicagoist
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[Interview] Artist David Leggett On *Coco River Fudge Street*

BY KIM BELLWARE

*David Leggett's creations are packed with pop culture nostalgia, raunchy humor, wry social commentary, and many, many penises. We sat down with the Chicago-based artist shortly before his solo exhibition *Coco River Fudge Street* ended its nearly-four month run at the Hyde Park Art Center yesterday. Leggett opened up about his early inspirations, the importance of embarrassing yourself and R. Kelly.*

Chicagoist: *Several aspects of your work seem to draw from '80s childhood nostalgia. "Coco River Fudge Street" sounds like it could be some wild, alternate universe version of Sesame Street.*

David Leggett: There's no meaning to the name! I actually came up with several names. Me and a friend came up with "Twinkie Pinkie Dinky Do" as a possible title and then we thought "oh no, that's terrible."

[Some of my work] is very *Garbage Pail Kids*. I used to have all the stickers on my bedpost. I recently bought the *Garbage Pail Kids* book, and I own the movie...it's pretty campy.

Chicagoist: **Do you remember when that movie came out? It was definitely marketed to kids and maybe parents didn't get how subversive it was. That kind of flew under the radar, and now when you give those images a second look you think "my parents let me put that all over my notebook?"**

DL: I think it started in 1984. It's kind of hard to believe. That wouldn't fly today. Some of them are really racist and really, really out there. And I didn't realize people like Art Spiegelman and other famous artists were behind this.

Chicagoist: **Your own work is "out there" too, with a lot of pieces that could reasonably be considered racist or misogynistic. In *Coco River Fudge Street*, no one is really safe--blacks, whites, gays, straights, men, women...Are you ever worried people will misinterpret your work?**

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DL: I'm not worried too much that people will come up with some totally different interpretation. Because even if I wrote up something, some artist's statement that said "my work is about this, this, this and this," you can't control how someone will take it.



Most people don't confront you and say "you're racist!" or "you're homophobic!" But sometimes you get approached by weird people. At my first solo show this guy comes up to me and--I'm not going to say his name--hands me a "race card." It's a black card with white lettering on it. And he's like "Yeah, you and I are a lot alike." He's a white guy living on the South Side and I'm like "All right..." But he was an artist, and his work was all about race and about living on the South Side--how he's *different*. He likes hip hop music...but I'm like, "who cares? It's not a big deal!"

Chicagoist: A lot of people like hip hop music...

DL: Seriously! But this was what his work was about. And he cornered me for a good hour, running my ear off and no one could help me! (*Laughs*) I still have the card.

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Chicagoist: When you're not doing exhibitions at galleries, you do most of your blogging and sharing of your new work via Tumblr. What about that method works so well for you?

DL: I do it because it's easy and I wanted a way to blog. And I wouldn't know how to do it otherwise. I feel like it's for someone younger--I'm only 31--but still...

Chicagoist: How has Tumblr propelled your work?

DL: It's definitely given me more exposure. When I started this project, I had no idea it would turn into this show. When it started out it was never going to be a "thing."

Chicagoist: In that Tumblr community, do your fans ever share their work with you?

DL: Oh, sometimes they do. Sometimes they'll just ask me to take a look at their stuff. Offer some words of encouragement. I usually just tell them to keep going. I'm not a negative person. I always want to encourage people to make work.

Chicagoist: You mentioned liking that blogging platform for its simplicity. How does that translate into the tools you use? You use a lot of the basics: colored pencil, colored paper, rubber stamps.

DL: Well, when I found out I was getting a show at the [Hyde Park Arts Center], you can see the work immediately got better! (*Laughs*)

Chicagoist: Better how?

DL: These pieces [for the show] were all painted. But then I realized that was taking too long and there was no way I could make that many original paintings. All the originals were going to be painted or pen and ink. There are some watercolors in the collection; a little bit of everything.

Chicagoist: Can you talk a bit about repurposing familiar imagery and including recognizable icons with your original drawings and paintings? Several pieces from the exhibit have stamps like Salvador Dali, a Tootsie Roll, and a Pickaninny.

DL: I'm a big collector of stamps—rubber stamps. In my undergrad, my minor was in printmaking, so I was always interested in these stamps. And the stamps that I buy, no one else wants. To me it just goes hand-in-hand. Having a degree in illustration and being into pop culture.

Chicagoist: Where do you find stamps like this?

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DL: Ebay! There's also a website called VivaLasVegaStamps and it's the largest rubber stamp company in the world. It has the strangest stamps you'll ever see. You have to check it out.

Chicagoist: You don't see stamps too often in gallery shows. In the printmaking world, are rubber stamps taken as seriously as techniques like letterpressing and silkscreening?



DL: Oh, no. It's considered "crafts." But when you use craft material you're already creating a problem. You have to make it work with the piece, and I feel like you honestly have to pick up new ways to make it work. The first time you did it it's like "ehhh," and then you always have to apply yourself a little harder.

Chicagoist: Is it sometimes helpful to have some limitations to work with? On a blank piece of paper you have no problems and simultaneously too many problems. But if you give yourself a starting point, even if it's a hurdle, does that get you going?

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DL: Yes, exactly! Sometimes you need that prompt.

Chicagoist: What's the real-world equivalent of this Tumblr as far as how you use it to share your work and the kind of work you publish on it?

DL: It would be like a refrigerator door or a whiteboard. That's how the originals started. When I was at summer residency, I would put a drawing up in the window so people would just see them as they're walking by. Very low-tech right there.

Chicagoist: Your blog "Coco River Fudge Street" has become a pretty long-running exhibition at the HPAC. But it existed before the show and continues to grow. What was the whole progression of this project?

DL: I valued making the projects because I made things I wouldn't normally do. It started when I was in a residency. It was a project where people contributed to what I worked on, and [began] because people were always saying "you should draw this."

It was almost like a radio station where you can make requests Tuesday, get old school stuff on Friday. So, I thought I'd do a blog every Tuesday where people could request a drawing. I had a feeling no one was going to have anything that decent (*laughs*) but some of them were interesting. I think towards the end people started running out of things to ask.

Chicagoist: And you were featuring what you deemed your worst work, early stuff from undergrad.

DL: You have to be willing to embarrass yourself!

Chicagoist: If you're taking requests...In *Trapped In The Closet*, when R. Kelly says "that's crazier than a fish with titties?" I really wanted to see that put on paper. How you would draw that?

DL: (*Laughs*) People see [R. Kelly] around in Chicago and he's always *R. Kelly*. He's always a character. I saw him the same time I saw Obama back in 2007. Obama was just announcing he was running for president and no one really cared. He was at the Hyde Park Borders and I got an autograph and shook his hand. But no one else noticed. And as soon as I go outside, R. Kelly pulls up in a lime green Lamborghini—playing his own music, of course—and everyone is running across the street. And he looks at everyone like "what are you doing?" You just pull up in a lime green Lamborghini blasting your own music and you're upset? (*Laughs*)

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