



“I MADE ABOUT 50 MILLIONS OF TOOLS:” AN INTERVIEW WITH CREATIVE GROWTH ARTIST JOHN MARTIN

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By Matt Dostal

Mississippi-born John Martin is an artist, ceramicist and sculptor who has been creating tools, trucks, flies and crocodiles by hand for over three decades at Creative Growth. Hatched from Martin’s mind are chunky ceramic sculptures in brilliant colors and exaggerated shapes, harkening back to his halcyon days growing up on his family’s farm in Arkansas.



As part of Inside Job — a monthly artists’ series led by LAND Gallery’s Sophia Cosmadopoulos — Martin answers her questions by proxy to Matt Dostal, Studio Manager at Creative Growth. The artist chats about his upcoming exhibition at New York’s Institute 193 1(B) on November 10, growing up with a pet pig named Susan and why the crescent wrench is his favorite tool to make.

Creative Growth is an Oakland-based non-profit that serves artists with developmental, mental and physical disabilities, providing a professional studio environment for artistic development, gallery exhibition and representation.

Matt Dostal: So, John, would you mind introducing yourself?

John Martin: I is a good artist.

MD: How would you describe your artwork?

JM: How would I describe my artwork? Tools, multi-tools, trucks, tractors, cars, airplanes.

MD: Do you do anything special with those things?

JM: I make ‘em outta wood, I make them out of clay.

MD: Do you want to talk about your sculptures more specifically?

JM: I made about 50 millions of tools. Yeah, a lot. I make wrenches, pliers, scissors, saws, anything. You can cut them out and paint them, instead of the real thing.

MD: How does it make you feel to make all those sculptures?

JM: I can make a lot of money!

MD: What it is about tools that you like so much?

JM: Well you can draw them on paper.

MD: But why do you love them so much? I know you have a fanny pack full of tools, a backpack full of tools, your dresser at home is full of tools — why do you have so many tools?



JM: Well, I could draw them on the wood. I don't know, I love them. They're nice. As long as you don't hurt nobody with them though.

MD: Does anybody else in your life have tools or love tools as much as you do?

JM: My cousin, he has a lot of tools. My favorite is his pruning shears for cutting flowers and stuff.

MD: So a lot of people in your family have tools?

JM: Yeah, they work on cars at the General Motors place. They be fixing cars and stuff.

MD: What's your favorite tool?

JM: Crescent wrench. Because that's my favorite. Well, you can tighten things with it. This one's not real, it's made out of cardboard.



MD: Where do you get the magazines, cardboard and newspaper you draw on?

JM: All on the streets, by the dumpsters and stuff.

MD: What do you like to draw the most?

JM: Trucks, on the street. The truck with the Batman logo on it, that's pretty good.

MD: Tell us about flies, why are they often seen in your work?

JM: Flies are pretty good, they buzz in your ear at night, especially if you got wet things around the house like garbage cans and stuff.

MD: Do they bug you?

JM: Yeah. We have to keep a fly swatter around the house.

MD: So if it's something that bugs you, why do you make so much artwork about it?

JM: You can't do nothing about them flies, nope.

MD: You can't do anything about them, so you just make artwork about them instead?

JM: Just keep the window pane open and the flies just go out. They come out the room.

MD: What about the crocodiles and sharks that you like to draw?

JM: Crocodiles are alright. I've seen one on TV. I saw a shark on TV. I have eaten shark, my auntie cooked it, in a cast iron skillet, in a frying pan. If you don't know how to treat 'em right, then you have to cook 'em right. They're dangerous. You better not go in that water.

MD: When did you start at Creative Growth?

JM: I think about 20 years, I think.

MD: Yeah, probably closer to 30 at this point. How did you find out about Creative Growth?

JM: Well my auntie, she looked it up on the computer. I was about 25 years old. I remember Florence and Cedric, one of the teachers that was here.

MD: Are you excited about your show in New York City at Institute 193 1(B)? It opens November 10th right?

JM: Uh huh, it's pretty good. I like it up there, I don't know how you get there, you have to go by plane. You can't take no pocket knife on no airplane, that's what my auntie told me. Or a cigarette lighter, nope, nothing like that.

MD: Can you tell me where you were born?

JM: Mississippi. I ain't been down there in a good while, though. When I was a kid, I was about 10 years old. They had a pig farm down there, they had a pig farm, my family did. Ora Mae and her godfather had that farm.

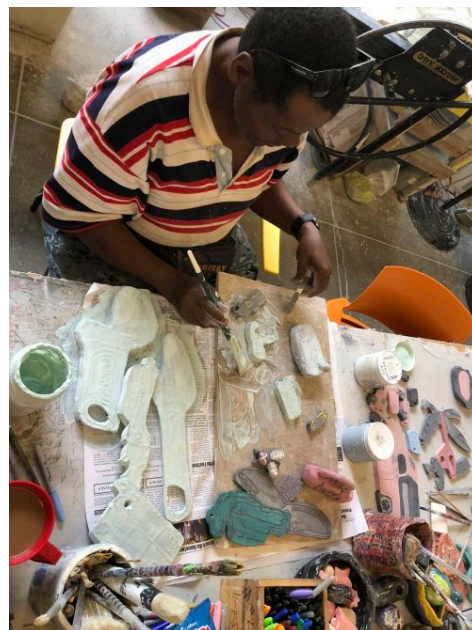
MD: Sometimes you tell me about the pigs' names, what were they?

JM: Susan.

MD: They were all named Susan? How many pigs were there?

JM: Four.

MD: And they were all named Susan? Four pigs is a small pig farm.



JM: That's more than enough. They helped raise hogs and stuff. They grew vegetables and collard greens, mustard greens and sweet potatoes.

MD: Did they have any tools on that farm?

JM: Yeah, tractors.

MD: Yeah, you love those tractors. Your aunt says she has videos of you driving those tractors. How is Oakland different than growing up in Mississippi?

JM: Well, if you don't like it in Mississippi, you don't have to go down there. I know why, because they got alligators.



MD: I feel like a lot of your artwork is a combination of the farm in Mississippi and Oakland. You got the tractors and the animals, but then you've got cell phones and cars with the big rims.

JM: Uh huh.

MD: Besides your artwork, what do you do on your days off?

JM: I come down here to the youth program. I just hang out.

MD: You do. You visit the Saturday Youth Program. You come here, get some stuff out of the vending machine, read the newspaper, have some coffee, do some drawings. Hang out with the youth. Do you do anything else on the weekend?

JM: I pick up cans and stuff. At the place across the street, at the bar where Hillary works. I think she gives me some free food, lunches and stuff. But anyway, if Hillary's not in today, see what's today? Tuesday. No, she's not in today. Today is her day off. She'll probably be there Thursday.

MD: You know her schedule, huh? What do you like to do at home?

JM: Draw. Watch some TV and stuff. I draw trucks and cars. I draw on anything.

MD: Yeah, you do draw on anything you can get your hands on, on notebooks and magazines. Do you have any goals for your artwork?

JM: I get a paycheck once a week. Make artwork, get paid, make some money.



MD: That's a good goal. Last question, how would you like people to think about you?

JM: They'll say, "I know this dude. He's a good artist, because he works at Creative Growth."

MD: That's a great note to end on — thanks, John.

Photo credit Diana Rothery.