



by Caleb Neelon and Alex Lukas
Photos by Aaron Farley

A.J. Fosik has been haunted by his last name for 12 years now. "The etymology of that word is sort of interesting and a little cheeky, but it's a metaphor that I like and one that has served well enough. The word is Australian, originally spelled *frans-si-c*. It's a verb to describe the act of people sifting through mine washings or waste piles to look for any gold that might have been missed, sifting through the garbage to find gold." It seems appropriate that he would have adopted it as his moniker. Like any good idea miner, A.J. Fosik digs through folk traditions. In doing so, he's found an aesthetic that feels at once old and new. Of course, like any good overseas name coming to America, it got slightly butchered on arrival. "From what I can gather," he says, "the spelling I use means 'to shit oneself' in Hungarian."



There is a distinctly American quality to the three-dimensional ursine beasts and delicately rendered paintings that Fosik has poured out over the last years. Many people mention it to him, and he understands why. But "American" can be a challenging feeling to articulate, however much one knows it when they see it.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a folk revival boomed in New York City's Greenwich Village. Bob Dylan emerged as the leading figure among the swarm of young people who had come to New York to explore a sound that captured the spirit of America—a sound based on an older folk ideal, with authenticity at a premium.

A.J. explains his connection: "Bob Dylan started with Woody Guthrie, but used those traditional songs and American symbolism as a platform. Because that platform was familiar, Dylan was able to open people up to ideas that were uncomfortable and sort of sneak them in—a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing." In similar fashion, Fosik employs familiar imagery—however odd or eerie—in order to sneak past the viewer's defenses. "The symbols and signifiers in the work are not meant to point directly at any one idea, but instead make the viewer question what the cultural icons mean to them personally and, in turn, how we relate to one another through a jumble of ideas that all constitute American culture."

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When that jumble first popped off the wall in a three-dimensional form for A.J., it did so without warning. "The first time I made a three-dimensional wood piece, I was happy with it because I knew instantly that I was onto something that had a lot of meat to it. The leap was instantaneous and not at all how my work usually develops." The idea came fully formed. He began cutting thousands of tiny wooden pieces with a scroll saw, each piece carefully stained with shoe polish and attached onto an armature, which A.J. often mounts on a carefully painted wood panel salvaged from vintage scooter crates. "You know how it is when you're creating music, art, what have you, and you just set out down different avenues just exploring different ideas and approaches. For every 20 that don't go anywhere maybe a handful will be interesting for a while, and very rarely do you hit on something that feels truly yours and just opens up."

Hailing from the suburbs of Detroit, Fosik explains, "In the late 1960s, everyone in Detroit got together at the behest of the Detroit Police Department after the entire city had been set on fire. It was agreed that all the white people except for Eminem and the MC5 would move out to the suburbs, so my family packed up and left. I was the first of my family to return in about 30 years." Fosik never graduated high school, and, in his words, "mucked around Detroit for a while" after he dropped out. "Mostly I was just up to no good, just being a real scumbag. The most constructive thing I was doing with myself at that point was graffiti."





After getting fed up with his SOB status and three-dimensional graffiti styles, Fosik decided to get his act together and go to college, majoring in illustration at Parsons. While the degree wasn't exactly what he might have hoped—"I may as well have gotten a degree in dirigible piloting or telegraph operation," he grouses—he connected with Providence's Will Rotgut. The two lived together in Brooklyn, teaming up to bolt hand-painted signs to poles across Manhattan and Brooklyn. "The signs were great for a while. For me, the first time I started doing signs that way was just as exciting as the first time I had ever done graffiti."

Fosik and Rotgut's venture came right before street art's boom, which for them equaled a bust. Street art all of a sudden became far more popular than was probably healthy for its own development. "Street art became a 'scene,' and that's always when things of that nature jump the shark," A.J. laments. "So many kids just started producing stuff that looked like what street art was supposed to look like. It just became like, 'If I draw this little robot alien character, then I'm in,' it's like putting on a uniform. It goes against everything that it was about for me. It totally kills that 'fuck you' aspect of it. A lot of people saw what was going on with street art and how well it could work as a means towards gallery attention, and it became saturated with jerks creating work that was nothing more than cheap self-promotion. I just didn't want to be associated with that." There was a silver lining, though. "On the other hand, it gave me a really good sense of just how overwhelming the number of people there were clamoring for the same brass ring, and I really tried to adjust my work ethic accordingly."

Fosik left New York in the fall of 2004, after close to six years living there, and hasn't settled permanently since. "Traveling is an incredible source of inspiration. That feeling of being completely alone and in a strange place is very energizing, yet there are also the common threads that run through so much of the country. It's really endlessly amazing. Somebody said, 'Half the fun of the travel is the aesthetic of lost-ness,' and I agree with that 100 percent."

That said, it's certainly nice to have a fixed address, if only a place you don't need to clean out every few months. "The travel is a double-edged sword for me, however, because while it really is inspirational, the nature of the work I'm doing makes setting up a studio a rather involved process. I'm always trying to find a balance between the two. I've moved about eight times in the last two years, and I'm getting a little burned out. I've just been wandering the country checking things out. Denver is just suitable to me for the time being; I can't really say if I'll stay here or not." Whether he settles or heads out on the road again, A.J. Fosik has got America in his blood, under his skin, and coming out of his fingertips.

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