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SPOTLIGHT
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Photos provided by Craig Stevens, who is pictured above.

Local Artist Craig Stevens Paints Memory Puzzles

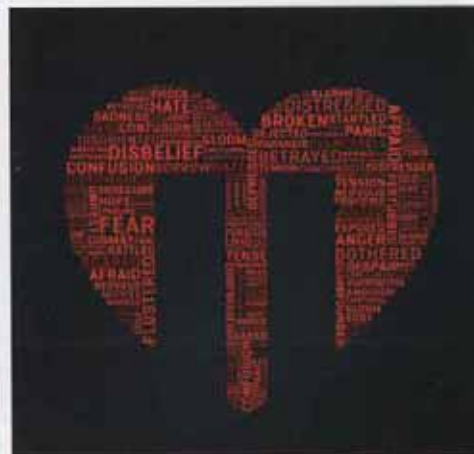
For Craig Stevens of Myrtle Beach, the winding road to fine-art began with a pirate, an inspirational football coach and billboards.

Born in 1960 in the small town of Perkasio, Pennsylvania, Craig started drawing as soon as he could hold a pencil, copying illustrations from his favorite books. He enrolled in the Famous Artists School, a 12-part correspondence course that advertised in magazines across the country with ads headlined "Draw Me!" and featuring a cartoon of a deer, a cowboy, a pirate, an elegant lady and many others that have since become nostalgic icons of advertising of the 1950s and '60s. The ads seemed to be everywhere, appearing in hundreds of magazines month after month. Craig drew the pirate.

In junior high school, his art teacher was nice but didn't teach much. His football coach, on the other hand, was his biggest fan and offered to pay Craig \$1,000 if he drew one picture a day until graduation. In his junior year, Craig moved and changed schools, so he never collected on that offer, but he kept on drawing every day. Around the same time, he began a lifelong fascination with drawing and painting the human figure.

HOOKED ON THE HUMAN FIGURE

"At the ripe age of 17, I had the good fortune of being introduced to life drawing under the tutelage of Myron Barnstone at the Barnstone Studios located in Frederick, Maryland, and I've been hooked ever since," Craig says, referring to the non-accredited private school based on the





the classical master/apprentice tradition. "It's the basis of everything I have done since then, and it is still where my biggest passion lies. Life drawing is the catalyst that jump-starts my ideation process."

After he graduated from high school at age 17, Craig lived on his own with no family support, so his formal education was somewhat stop-and-start. When he could afford it, he went to Kutztown University in Pennsylvania and took studio classes. But after two years, the money ran out, and he had to find work. Eventually, he found his way to the billboard business, which became his second big influence.

"I walked into the shop and saw guys painting huge billboard panels hanging on the back wall," Craig says. "I knew at that moment, that's what I wanted to do. Those guys taught me everything I needed to know to become a billboard painter."

Craig started working in outdoor advertising in 1984 and still does today. He was a billboard painter for over 12 years, painting on location by day and in the shop at night. Since he was paid by the square foot, Craig was willing to work long hours. After he fell and broke his back at work in 1996, Craig stayed in outdoor advertising but shifted his creative work to the computer, working as an art director.

When he was no longer painting signs for work, Craig's personal painting time slowed down, and he did not pursue public exposure for a while. He later resumed his drawing and painting work, and has since produced some remarkable fine-art paintings. He attributes his return to his artistic pursuits to his older brother, who passed away from pancreatic

cancer in 2016. He was 59. Craig's brother always asked why he didn't sell his paintings.

"I guess our mortality as humans caught up with me, and I made a conscious decision to put my art out in the world. I didn't want to find myself regretting never trying," Craig says.

PAINTING FROM LIFE AND MEMORY

"My works are the confluence of my life experiences: classical training at a young age, years as a sign and billboard artist, and working in advertising as a graphic designer and art director," Craig says. "My work takes two basic tracks, one is directly related to my classical figure drawing background, and the other is a direct influence of my advertising/billboard days."

Since moving to Myrtle Beach in 2013, Craig has participated in ArtFields, an annual showcase for Southeastern artists held in Lake City, South Carolina. In 2017 and 2018, he exhibited paintings that were directly inspired by his history with billboards.

His 2017 painting, "Best Thing Since Sliced Bread—Time will Tell," a triptych made up of three 5-foot by 9.5-foot mash-ups of iconic images from advertisements. Images of Lucky Strike cigarettes, Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man are jammed together in four separate panels that make up one image, with ghostly white translucent letters spelling "TIME." A second painting consists of Oreo Cookies, Doublemint Gum and a Big Mac with the lettering spelling "WILL." And the third painting combines Sunbeam Bread, Morton Salt, Aunt Jemima and Wonder Bread, with

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letters spelling "TELL." The three were displayed together outside as mini billboards along the street.

Recently "TELL" was accepted for inclusion in the South Carolina State Museum's 30th Anniversary Juried Exhibition.

"These pieces are the merging of several experiences — my years as a sign and billboard artist, the recent losses of my brother and my mentor, and the recent political climate," says Craig. "I've come to a general realization that time moves on, leaving fragments and pieces of memory and experience that communicate in messages we may not be aware of on the surface."

His 2018 ArtFields painting, "That Will Leave a Mark (Legacy)," continues this approach with a wider variety of familiar images, including bubble gum, a diapered baby and snack cakes. What both paintings have in common is that they were inspired by what Craig saw for many years as he painted billboards — not just the ads themselves, but also

the layers he found as he replaced one image with another, telling multiple stories and having many levels for viewers to explore and relate to.

"Billboards, like memory, were recycled and repainted with no regard to what lies underneath," Craig says. "Over the years, while painting over old ads on billboards outside, I might come across layout lines of a painter, different styles, or techniques that I hadn't seen before laid down five to 10 years prior, exposed by the fading or peeling paint."

Craig's fine-art paintings explore the puzzle he found in these layers of old advertising.

"These small billboards are mash-ups of images and lettering similar to the layering I encountered while working on billboards," Craig says. "There is a history, a process and layers intentionally left for the viewer to discover, creating a visual time capsule of what came before."

AWARDS & HONORS

- Coastal Carolina Ad Club 2014, two Silver
- Two OBIE Awards finalist nominations
- Atlanta ADDY Awards 2012, Gold, Silver and four Bronze
- Atlanta ADDY Awards 2011, Silver
- OAAG Creative Contest 2011, Third Place
- Creative Allies 2011, CD Cover Design Contest winner
- NEPA ADDY Awards 2006, Judges' Choice
- NEPA ADDY Awards 2005, Best in Show
- District 2 Regional ADDY Awards 2004, Silver (Washington, D.C., New York, Philadelphia, Delaware, Maryland)
- Greater Lehigh Valley Ad Club 2008, one Gold and five Silver
- NEPA Ad Club 2007, two Gold and three Silver
- NEPA Ad Club 2006, three Gold and seven Silver
- NEPA Ad Club 2005, three Silver
- NEPA Ad Club 2004, two Silver
- NEPA Ad Club 2003, one Gold

"Life drawing is the catalyst that jump-starts my ideation process."



To see more of Craig's art, visit artguycraig.com or [behance.net/craigstevens](https://www.behance.net/craigstevens).