DR. CAROLYN FARB’S INTERVIEW WITH

BOB “DADDY-O” WADE

WRITTEN BY dr. carolyn farb

CF: Where did you grow up?
BW: I was born in Austin and graduated from the University of Texas. But basically, I grew up all over Texas. My Dad was a career hotel man, and we lived in hotels. We had a lot of perks...room service and bell hops.

CF: Why do they call you Daddy-O?
BW: Fraternities like to assign you a nickname. I got lucky. I had this border town, “hot rod” manner of speaking and acting. Bob Pettit aka Bull Pettit from Fort Worth called me Daddy-O, and it stuck. And, of course, thanks to my daughter Christine’s new baby, I’m now Granddaddy-O.

CF: Was Roy Rogers your second cousin and what effect did it have on your work?
BW: Yes, on my mother’s side. In the 1950’s, we all grew up loving Roy and dressing like “little buckaroos,” and I guess that kind of subconsciously stays with you. “Cowboy chic” was also big in the 1970’s and cowboy boots had been worn in Washington, D.C., by numerous politicians like L.B.J. That’s why I did the 40-foot-tall cowboy boots three blocks from the White House in 1979. They’ve been standing tall in front of North Star Mall in San Antonio for the last 25 years.

CF: What about the cowgirl paintings?
BW: They were crowd pleasers. I was lucky over the years to find enough vintage photos to produce 25 years of Bob Wade’s Cowgirls and have them end up in a retrospective in 2003 at The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth.

CF: I love the way the cowgirls outfitted themselves.
BW: A lot of the cowgirls made their own colorful costumes and wore cool 10-gallon hats.

CF: What do you think made the cowgirls so fascinating?
BW: Before television, when the rodeo rolled into town, it was big-time show business. The cowgirls were the equivalent of today’s women’s movement and female sports stars. I’m referring to the women who rode bucking broncos. Trust me, back in those days, they didn’t have barrel racing. These were really tough women. They gutted up and stayed on the road just like the guys did. A bunch of them died in the arena.

CF: What exactly do you do with these old pictures?
BW: What I do is a cross between restoring an old classic car and a period film. I give these old pictures a second chance by making them oversized. An 8 x 10 is still a pretty small picture. You can’t really see the details. When you make something that is four to 10 feet wide, you create a visual image that comes to life as never before. There’s a story I tell people, it’s one of my middle of the night stories, and it’s mostly true, even though it was probably from one of my tequila-and-orange-juice nights. It was about three or four in the morning, and I’m working on one of my cowgirls, putting on her makeup, fixing the hat. And one of them says to me, “Thanks, for giving us a second chance.”

CF: I love it!
BW: Gives me goosebumps. When I discover these images, I look at these little, six-inch postcards and say, “Oh my God, that would be fabulous if you blew it up.” When I get something back from the lab – just black and white on canvas – then I have to go into the studio and figure out what colors and how to go about it. And you develop it very slowly...a little color here, a little color there, and the piece evolves as you go along. And then it becomes this other kind of art, with balance, colors, design, saturation. That’s where all the art school training comes out.
CF: With a strong foundation, you can go in many directions.
BW: I have never been trained as a sculptor. But a person who makes a custom car is a sculptor – from the interior, seat, hubcaps – all aesthetic decisions. Then becoming a college professor for 11 years. Most people don’t know that I got a Masters’ degree from Berkley in ’66 in the middle of the funky craziness of that era.

CF: You’ve been in many exhibits. Tell me about the big show at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris.
BW: In 1977, I sent an entire Texana Museum inside an Airstream-type trailer. I received a special acknowledgement award; they gave me $2,000. After presenting the money, they told me it was a tradition that the winning artist takes the judges and curators to lunch. You know what the bill came to?

CF: Even exchange. You’ve enjoyed a lot of titles, like the “King of Texas Kitsch” and the “Pioneer of Texas Funk.”
BW: The media is responsible for that. A lot of my work is derived from stuff I collect. My wife, Lisa, and I have shelves and storage units full of stuff. She’s my business consultant and color advisor. We put together a show called, “Daddy-O’s Stuff,” at the Lawndale Art Center that filled the entire space.

CF: Where did the idea for the band of frogs come from?
BW: Those were designed from a little collection of stuffed frogs I have. You can go down to Mexico and buy those frogs playing the guitar, riding a motorcycle, and shooting pool. Monk White, a Kappa Sig fraternity buddy, gave me the iguana that inspired the 40-foot-long one that sat on top of the Lone Star Café in New York.

CF: Do the Mexican artifacts reflect certain cultural memory?
BW: These crazy little Mexican artifacts go back to my childhood in El Paso. A critic might say, “Oh, he’s really got bad taste.” It doesn’t have anything to do with good taste or bad taste, it’s like pop art. My stuff is more bordertown – all my Pancho Villa Mexican Revolutionary Series – I love those banditos. I’ve never been able to have enough of that kind of subject matter.

CF: Where did the idea for the documentary Too High, Too Wide come from?
BW: When I did the Daddy-O book, it was becoming clear to me that I was going to have to do the old book-tour thing. I knew that there would probably be a lot of those book situations that were going to be really dull. I thought I’ve got to do something sculptural like a dog-and-pony show that goes on the tour. And that’s where I came up with the Iguana Mobile. When I went to the bookstore and parked it outside, it created a buzz. It went to children’s museums, galleries, all over. It attracted the attention of a documentary filmmaker, Karen Dinitz, who knew I could guarantee pretty funny subject matter.

CF: What’s on the horizon for Daddy-O?
BW: Two things I am happy about: I’m doing a herd of six fiberglass longhorns for the lobby of Temerlin McClain, an advertising agency in Dallas, and Schenck Southwest Publishing out of Santa Fe is doing a coffee table book of all my work.