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AIRBRUSH ARTIST

Brandon Donahue

You see them in souvenir shops from Gatlinburg to Gulf Shores: white backgrounds airbrush-painted with black bears in hearts, or palm trees with couples' names intertwined. These neon-colored creations evoke emotions like cotton candy: light and fluffy but fleeting. But not when the airbrush is created by Brandon Donahue. An assistant professor at Tennessee State University, artist, and 2018 Tanne Foundation award winner, Donahue uses airbrush to make real statements about art, community, and loss. (brandonjaquezdonahue.com) —Margaret Littman

Age: 33

His first studio: His mom's basement, where, as a teenager, he'd make t-shirts. "I got into it to impress my friends," he says. When the basketball team or a cheerleading squad placed an order, he noted the strong communal ties. It made him "start to think about how airbrushing could be transformed into something else." In those days, about 70 percent of his business was for funerals. "I made a lot of money making all those shirts. But I also felt like a grief consultant."

Why he doesn't wear black to funerals: He likes to question the reasons behind such traditions. "Death is a celebration for most cultures, of the spirit leaving the physical realm into a spiritual realm."

In memorial: That perspective helped him create "R.I.P.," a show mounted at Elephant Gallery on Buchanan Street last year. Donahue airbrushed the names of those who had died in Nashville due to gun violence in the previous year-and-a-half. He researched the circumstances of their deaths and made memorials to the 107 deceased. "With the bright fluorescent colors in 'R.I.P.' I wanted [to] celebrate those who have lost their lives to gun violence. I want to

empower those lives who were powerless in the loss to violence."

What is art? "I used to think about 'fine arts versus airbrush,' but I do not have an issue with it anymore," he says. "When I went to college, I did not know what an artist was. But now I can see that airbrush is just a tool. Artists and the art community are great, but we approach art differently than common people. Sometimes the work can be too complex. I do not want to make work that is over anyone's head."

D.C. inspiration: "It took me 18 years to figure out how to use airbrush in a gallery setting. I wanted to use airbrushing to talk about death and funerals." He was inspired by Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which is also focused solely on the names of those who died. "There is a lot in a name. In just rewriting the names."

This time it's not personal: Donahue created another "R.I.P." at Atlanta Contemporary last year. "I didn't know if it would be the same since I didn't have that kind of connection to Atlanta. I researched the gun epidemic and found out that Atlanta, even though it is bigger, is not as bad as Nashville. Nashville capped Atlanta by 100 deaths."

