

Rest of the Best 2014: Houston's Top 10 Painters

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Before we get to the list of Houston's Top 10 Painters, we'd like to make a quick statement about who isn't on this list. There are lots of talented, gifted local painters that we didn't mention here. That's not because we don't appreciate their work, but because we defined the term "painter" a little more narrowly than might be common. It helps us from comparing apples and oranges.

We didn't include any mixed-media artists. Yes, many of them use paint in creating their artwork, but we were looking specifically at artists who create work that is just painted. We didn't include any muralists here, either. Painting the side of a building and painting a 20-inch canvas aren't quite the same thing. Yes, both are paintings, but the differences in scale make it hard to compare the two. And we didn't include any out-of-town artists. There are several folks doing great work outside of Harris County, but this is a list of Houston's top 10 painters. (Thank you, Moe Profane, for kindly nominating yourself to this list, but as much as we like your work, including the recent exhibit at Redbud Gallery, you live in San Antonio.)

10. T. Smith Recently named to the *Houston Press* 100 Creatives, T. Smith is a former Hunting Art Prize finalist. Influenced by surrealism, Smith first photographs individual elements such as a mannequin, a garden, a gravestone. Smith draws on a huge collection of photos assembled over several years and eventually pairs elements which can be paired visually, though not always narratively. The painting seen above, *The Waiting Room No. 2*, is from a series Smith recently completed and showed at the JoMar Visions, Hardy & Nance Studios.

9. Lillian Warren We like Lillian Warren's delicate paintings, especially the work from her *Waitscapes* series. Prompted by yet one more afternoon sitting in Galleria-area traffic, Warren noticed everyone was moving and waiting at the same time. "I was driving back from the Galleria area, traffic was thick, I was annoyed," she told *Houston Press* writer Meredith Deliso in 2012. Then it hit me. I saw this long, multi-level snake of cars winding through space and time, everyone sealed in a personal cocoon, all of us trapped in no man's land, unwilling but docile participants in this insane experience. Well, after that I had to see if I could capture something of that feeling and that visual impact."

8. Shelbi-Nicole Coming in at No. 8 on this list is Shelbi-Nicole, one of the youngest and most exciting painters working in the city today. "Bold" doesn't quite capture her style. We think "brazen" is a better description. She's a prolific painter and counts among her collectors a man who commissioned her to create enough art to fill his entire house as well as several public art projects. Shelbi-

Nicole has been profiled in the *Houston Press* 100 Creatives series and is an Artopia alum.

Shelbi-Nicole has a group show with friends Dandee Warhol and Daniel Anguilu planned for later this year.

7. Taft Mc Whorter A self-taught artist, Taft McWhorter has a background in business and youth ministry.

Launching his career in art in 2007, he spent a couple of years as the business manager of John Palmer Art before opening his own gallery in 2009. A year later he closed his gallery in order to focus on art production.

An Alum of the Toronto International Art Fair, and is represented in galleries both here and in New Orleans.

6. Fariba Abedin Iranian American artist Fariba Abedin has a slightly unexpected educational background for an artist. She has a bachelor's degree in architecture and a master's degree in education. Her work often explores geometric abstraction, allowing color and form to become her subject rather than just narrative tools. As seen in the photo above, she often combines multiple canvases and employs the wall they hang on, to form a large, colorful display.

5. J. Antonio Farfan Born in Monterrey, Mexico, J. Antonio Farfan took a year for independent study in Paris before he completed his BFA at the University of Houston. After graduating in 1995, he spent a couple of years in New York. These days, he's calling Houston his home-base. Lucky us.

While Farfan's work may seem to resemble that of other contemporary abstract artists, his visual vocabulary is actually developed from his research in medieval philosophy and early concepts of time. It's a wonderful mix of science and aesthetics that produces striking, insightful images.

4. Nicola Parente Italian-born abstract expressionist Nicola Parente may have the distinction of being the only artist on our list to have designed sets for a ballet; he worked with Dominic Walsh Dance Theater on *Terminus*. But then Parente has made a career out of creating art in unexpected ways. Not only does he paint, he designs textiles, creates sculpture, works in installations (including one curated by Michael Crowder and David A. Brown for the experimental art space micro scope 1824), he's worked with the Bayou City Arts Festival (as vice president on the board of directors), Writers in School (on the outreach committee) and with the Winter and Spring Street Studios' artist advisory board (he has his studio in the complex). We especially like his over-sized paintings.

3. Justin Garcia Winner of the Best Artist in the *Houston Press* Best of Awards last year, abstract expressionist Justin Garcia's work is focused on color. He showed a small collection of his work at last year's Artopia that was extremely well-received. Garcia was still a teen when he started getting the first commissions for his work (murals for clients of his faux painter/designer mom). A native Houstonian, Garcia is actively involved in the business end of his career. "At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how good you are if nobody knows your name and nobody's seen your work," he told us in a 2013 interview. Garcia told us he's working on moving into the international art scene.

2. Saul Balagura We're pretty sure no one else on this list has as varied a resume as Saul Balagura. Born in Columbia in 1943 to Romanian-Jewish parents, Balagura is a self-taught artist. He's also a poet. He started medical school and had his first art exhibit will still in his teens. (He has a M.D. from University of Valle, a Ph.D. in Psychology from Princeton University and a Neurosurgery degree from Albert Einstein Medical Center.) Working as a neurosurgeon until the mid-1990s, Balagura opened an art studio in New Mexico before coming to Houston in 2006.

In 2008, the Holocaust Museum Houston held "In Search of Hope," an exhibit made up of Balagura's images of the Holocaust. He's not a Holocaust survivor, so these were not images that he had seen first hand but rather images that echoed the survivor experience. At the time Balaguara said, "Victims must have memories; but only when those who were not victims remember: will the eternal flame keep warm the hearts of generations to come."

1. David Hardaker When we asked for suggestions for this list, there was one name that we heard over and over - David Hardaker. There's no surprise as to why the figurative artist has earned the respect of his peers. He has an excellent eye for line and color and a sense of humor about his work. (He created the Lost Monster series, a collection of small portraits of alien creatures after some prompting from his daughter.) The owner of the Avis Frank Gallery, Hardaker produces a limited number of works annually.