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# Artist Immortalizes the Dead in Beautiful NSU Art Museum Show



*"Scott Covert: I Had a Wonderful Life" (installation images by Steven Brooke)*

To paraphrase an old saw, death is one of only two certainties in this world. No matter how much notoriety or ignominy we receive on this pale blue dot, it will ultimately be the terminus for all of us—which means that Scott Covert will never run out of material. Until it's his turn, of course.

A former actor from New Jersey who rose to prominence in the East Village art scene in the 1980s, Covert's "studios" are the cemeteries of the world, his workstations the gravestones of notable people. From these honorary reliefs, he deploys a practice, dating back to Victorian England, called grave rubbing, in which he lifts impressions of names and epitaphs from tombstones, then repurposes them: sometimes as one or two reliefs on a spacious canvas, other times as elements of collages, in which countless names share a densely populated space.

Covert calls these works "Monument Paintings," and NSU Art Museum is exhibiting dozens of them all the way through next spring, in "Scott Covert: I Had a Wonderful Life," the artist's first solo museum exhibition. As is often the case at this museum, the first painting you encounter, if you walk the exhibition in order, crystallizes the artist's multilayered, maximalist approach. "Egyptian Mile" is a tribute to music greats through time. Miles Davis has the largest relief, roughly in the center of the painting, befitting his status as a giant among mortals. But Covert's selection of captured gravestones is idiosyncratic and personal, making no distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow: Thus, punk icon Johnny Thunders is placed between Lionel Hampton and Irving Berlin. Leonard Bernstein sits atop Leonard Cohen, allowing us to equate these legendary Leonards.

The more you gaze at the work, the more you see. Underneath and around the names, you'll notice musical notations, a trumpet, a saxophone, all of them emerging hazily from the canvas like dream imagery, the entire canvas a singular style somewhere between abstract expressionism and graffiti art.



"Blue Cacophony with Two Dean Martins"

Similarly, "Midnight at the Oasis" is the literary salon of Covert's imagination, a place where Bukowski, Poe, Burroughs, Vidal, Melville, Faulkner and many more mingle in the afterlife. In "Blue Cacophony with Two Dean Martins"—Covert seems to associate the color blue, and its countless shades, with the names that mean the most to him—the eye tracks from queer actor Brad Davis, who died of HIV in 1991, to Lee Strasberg, to Bob Ross, to Janet Leigh, the linkage between these often disparate names existing primarily in Covert's consciousness.

You'll notice that in works like these, the dates of completion are "1996-2022," and perhaps they remain unfinished, as more of his favorite people shake off their mortal coils and find homes on his canvases. His paintings are dizzying mélanges of names stamped atop names like destinations in a passport, which, in a sense, is what they are: Because each relief was captured by the artist's hand, in locations as far-flung as Russia and Argentina, they reflect his travels as much as his artistic choices.



Other pieces make potent use of repetition. The wittily titled "Blonde on Blonde" showcases many dozen rubbings of Marilyn Monroe's relief. Frank Sinatra's relief is repeated 20 times on the same canvas, along with the crooner's pitch-perfect epitaph, "The Best is Yet to Come." Like a Buddhist



carefully inscribing every word of the Heart Sutra, works like this have the feeling of a devotional labor of love for Covert, as there are no copies in his work: Each of these 21 Sinatras is its own unique practice of lifting and rubbing.

Visitors will find insights throughout Covert's oeuvre, but I most appreciated the painter's sense of humor and his political commentary, which often go hand in hand. At first, the inclusion of hate merchant Andrew Breitbart seems a curious choice for an LGBTQ individual like Covert, until you see the other "Andrew" that he's paired with: Andrew Cunahan, the spree killer who murdered Gianni Versace. (There's the rub—literally.)

My favorite witticism in this exhibition occurs in "Make Me Laugh," a collection of comic actors from the golden age of television—Soupy Sales, Oliver Hardy, Jack Benny, Shemp Howard. The name in the middle, in the largest font, is that of former U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, the grandest of the stooges.

In a sense, though, even this dubious recognition in the Covert canon says something about the person. Even most famous people don't earn the immortality of appearing in one of Covert's curated tributes. As somebody once said, it's an honor just to be nominated.

"Scott Covert: I Had a Wonderful Life" runs through April 23 at NSU Art Museum, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale. Admission costs \$5-\$12. For information, call 954/525-5500 or visit [nsuuseum.org](http://nsuuseum.org).