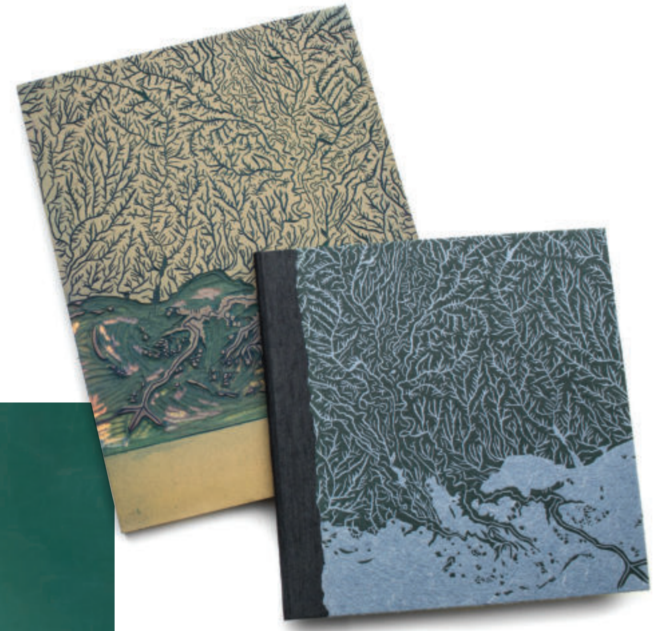
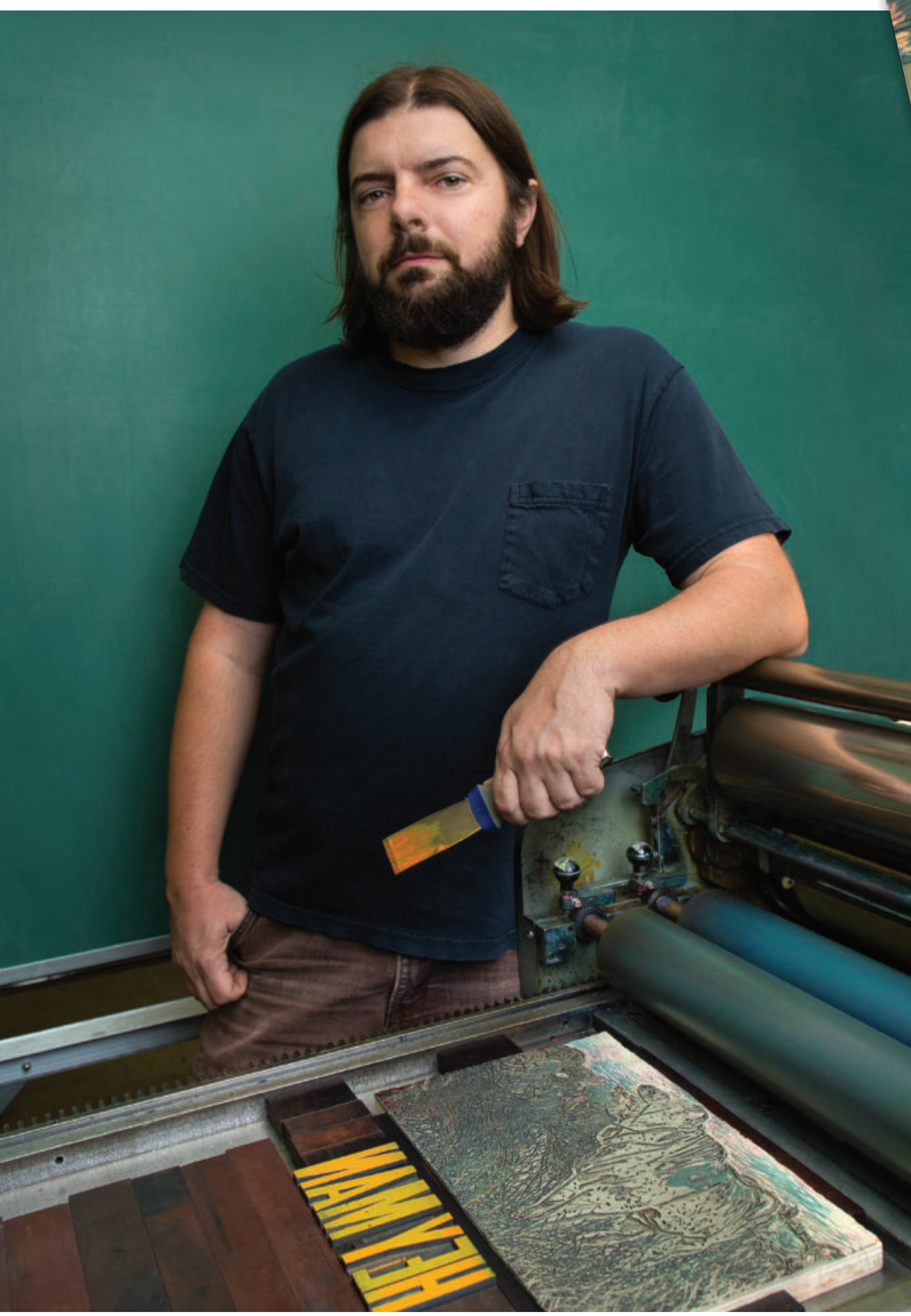
# Paper Trail

## Ruston bookmaker Frank Hamrick pumps up the volumes

BY JEFFREY ROEDEL
PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO





He's no fortune teller. He makes paper. That's how Frank Hamrick knows the exact future of the T-shirt he's wearing, and it's not the bottom of a drawer or on the racks of a nearby Ruston thrift shop.

He'll boil the cotton garment, beat the slurry to a pulp, then dry and press it as pages to use in a brand-new book.

"It's getting a little worn, so I'll turn this shirt into sheets of paper," he says in a grainy Georgia drawl. "If you ever hear 'that guy got beaten to a pulp,' well that phrase relates back to making paper."

Though he creates vivid letterpress greeting cards and a recent project saw him collaborating with roots music icons Gillian Welch and David Rawlings on a book about their archival recordings, Hamrick's work most often tailgates his own visual fantasia, a blend of rough-hewn paper-making and book-binding, film and tintype photography and the surprises of curating a litany of curiosities.

With work housed in permanent collections in New York City, London and across the South — iconic photographer Sally Mann is a fan — Hamrick serves as an associate professor in the School of Design at Louisiana Tech University. In his spare time, he conducts workshops like the ones he held last summer at the prestigious Penland School of Crafts in Asheville, and creates his own commercial and fine art books, not all of them borne out of old T-shirts.

It's a passion that began while he was rolling on a half-pipe in the backyard of his childhood home.

### AT A GLANCE

**NAME**
Frank Hamrick

**LOCATION**
Ruston

**BUSINESS**
Printmaker and book craftsman

**WEBSITE**
frankhamrick.com

Hamrick was gifted his first camera at age 10, and quickly found a niche taking photos of his friends and fellow skateboarders.

"Finding your place and your individuality to create something that's rewarding for you personally is so important, and that's what I tell my students," Hamrick says. "I wasn't going to play ball or even pursue skateboarding professionally, so photography set me on my path."

Hamrick grew up in Macon, Georgia, a quiet town in sheep's clothing, so to speak. Beneath a *Southern Living* surface lies a haven of hawkish creative history, from the Southern sprawl of The Allman Brothers Band who invented jazz and blues-infused jam rock there in the early '70s, to the birthplace of the blaring boogie of Little Richard, a black and gay gospel singer who lit a match on rock'n'roll with "Tutti Frutti."


As a teen, Hamrick interned at Capricorn Sound Studios where the Allmans cut "Midnight Rider," and today his work reflects that same mystery of Macon's duality with river-deep measures of poetry and a wink of modern mythmaking.

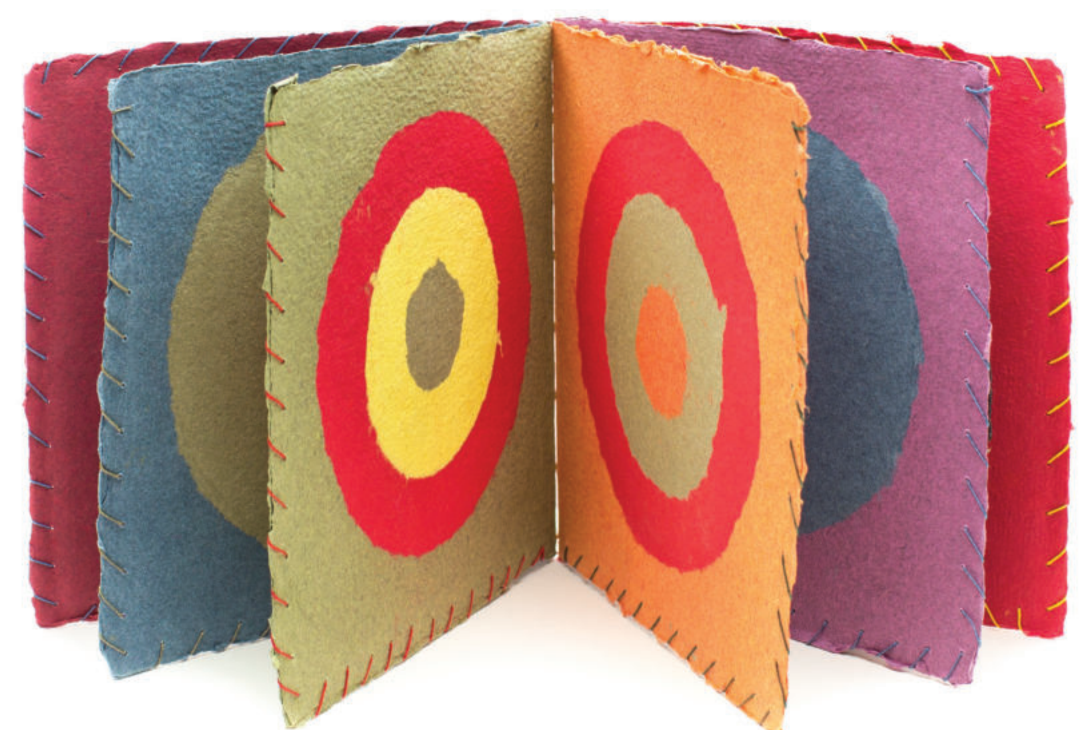
"I am drawn to words and images that suggest something beyond what they simply state and show," Hamrick says. "When making a piece of work, I don't want to just throw a rock in the river. I want that stone to skip as many times as possible and ripple the water with every bounce."

With titles like "I Found It When I Stopped Looking," "A Rabbit Runs in a Circle" and "It Was There All Along," Hamrick's books are found-art journals of a Deep South that still exists if one only stays for one more song, or keeps walking even though it's getting late, or turns first to the note-splattered, dog-eared chapter, or rolls down the right dusty road.

"Books are intersections of many things," he says. "It's a time-based media. You have to spend time with it, like a movie or a play or an album of music. With my books, I want it to feel like you went for a drive through this other world."

For Hamrick, holding a book in his hands makes experiencing art truly tactile, and it creates content that is more engaging than something shining on a device, because it fires up feelings and imagination equally.

"The more senses you can activate, the more memorable it is," Hamrick says. "What do you get with a book instead of reading or looking at art on a device? You get something that expresses permanence. But at the same time, books can be damaged or lost, so you get something precious." ■



## Q+A

**Between Georgia, New Mexico and Louisiana, you've experienced the land and cultures of three very different areas in the Southern U.S. How has living in Louisiana made a mark on your work?** Living in those states, as well as Maine and Italy, revealed what is consistent from one place to the next and what is unique. Louisiana has made me understand cause and effect on a deeper level, studying history to see how actions from the past led to the way things are today. But also, being in a small college town has helped me realize the impact a single person can have.

**What is one theme or subject for a book you have not explored yet but want to tackle?** I regularly visited the Rio Grande while attending graduate school at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. People often hear about the river in the context of national border issues. But I would like to travel the Rio Grande to make a photography book approaching the river from a personal, ecological perspective. Perhaps not even telling viewers what they were seeing, then reveal the river's name at the end so people could really reconsider that part of the world.

**When not creating or teaching, what do you do for fun in the Ruston area? Do you travel much these days?** I love catching live music here in Ruston where I have the chance to interact with musicians like songwriter Kevin Gordon and bluesman Robert Finley. I am also working with other artists in town on a long-term project to convert the former city pool into Ruston Skatepark.



ADDITIONAL Q+A ONLINE AT LOUISIANALIFE.COM

# About Face

## New Orleans designer Basqo Bim conjures the carnival spirit with character-filled custom masks

BY JEFFREY ROEDEL
PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

It's an epic, bejeweled beast of folkloric proportions. Or else it's a mischievous, spinning sun prop escaped from the set of a children's TV show and loose on the sidewalks of New Orleans. Whatever it may be, it's certainly 10 feet of electric skin, all patchworked fabric and ornamental trappings and foraged flora like clever detours of design ambling through the artsy Bywater neighborhood.

At the controls is bespoke mask-maker Basqo Bim, tucked inside of this wild assembly, but joking and gesturing with all the charisma of a carnival, cutting it up with every local and tourist passing by and those stopping to gawk and squawk.

"I would hope it's not unapproachable, and that they would get a kick out of it," Bim says of the daydream of an idea hibernating in his brain until the time is right to sew this seed. When the coffee is on and the dogs are walked, when he's fully immersed in thought, when Mingus is blasting, when Russian Orthodox artists and medieval jesters and Sandinista revolutionaries come out to play, and he can swim deep in his river of influences once again.

"The goal always is to bend reality, to make what I see in my head and put it out in the world," Bim says.

And, really, is that too much to ask?

Now 36, Bim didn't become an artist until he hit 30, while he was toiling in an office job and received a strong challenge from his younger brother, Fernando, an artist who died in 2021.

"He was my younger brother and my best friend, and one day he said, 'But what do you do? This is it?'" Bim recalls. "He put me in a tailspin, I realized I didn't have much to show for the last decade."

So he began sketching, then making detailed illustrations, then embroidering his own designs. While living in Portland, the brothers produced a massive grim reaper puppet requiring three operators to tower over the crowds at rowdy anti-Trump demonstrations. "That was all about bringing our own energy and creativity to that moment," Bim says.

### AT A GLANCE

**HOMETOWN**
Greenwood, South Carolina

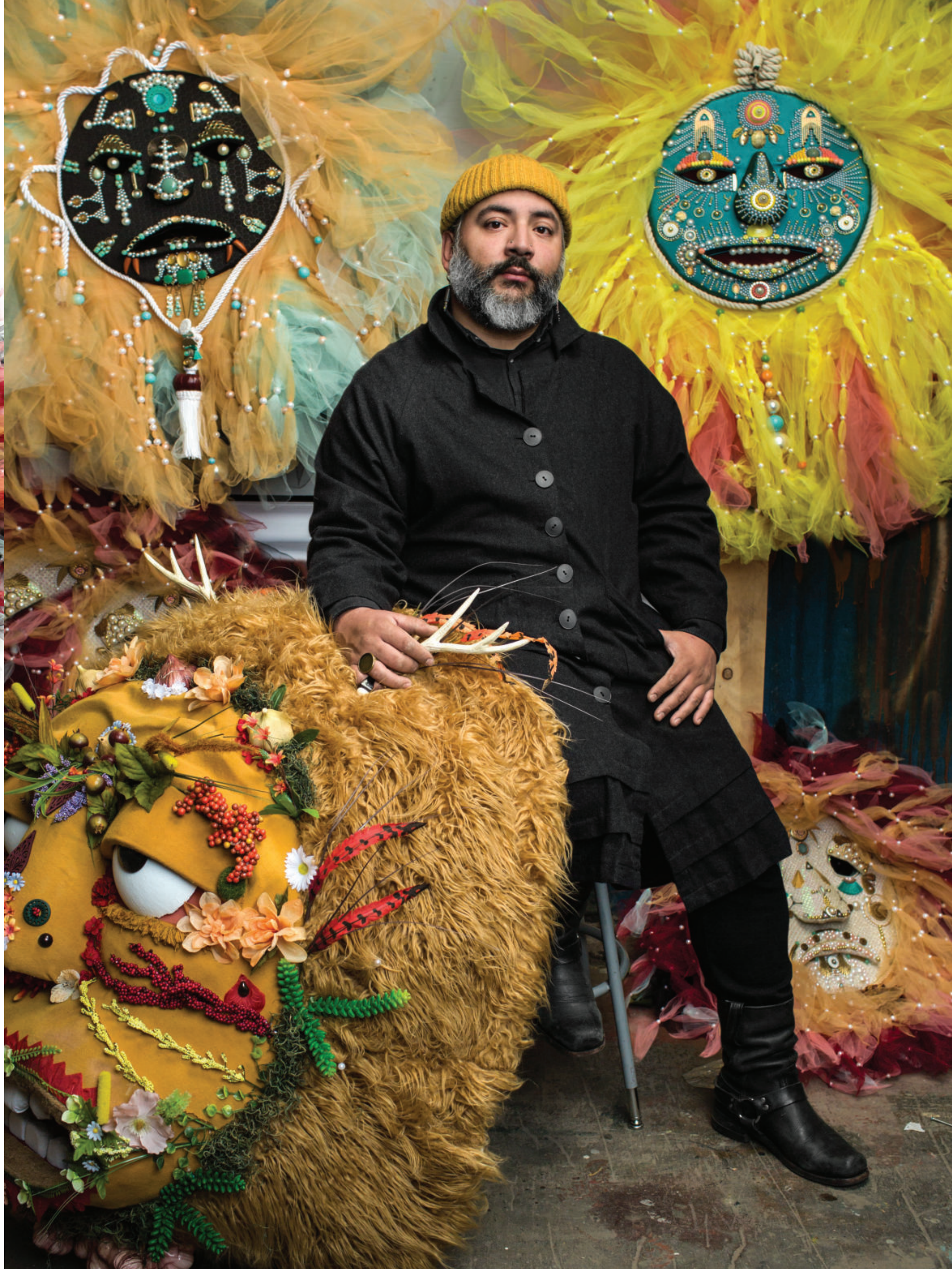
**AGE**
36

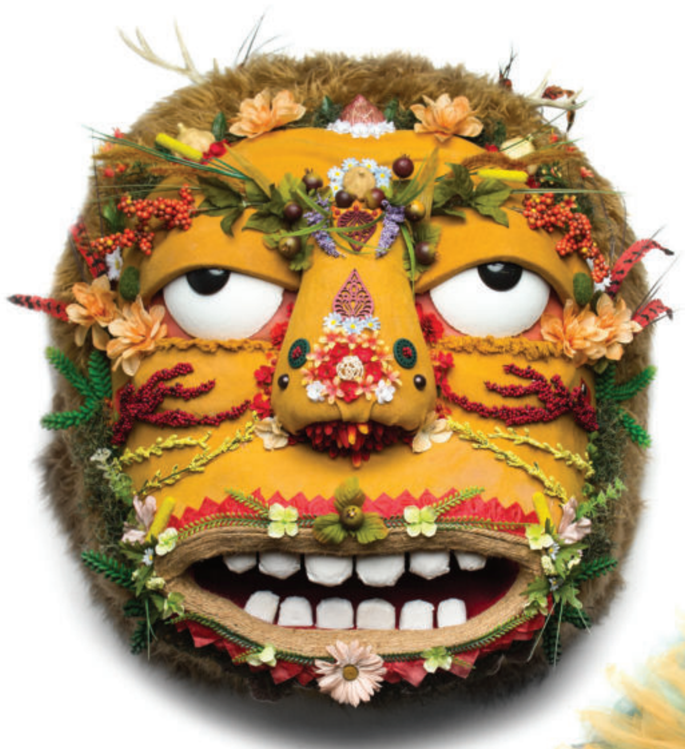
**INSTAGRAM**
@basqo_

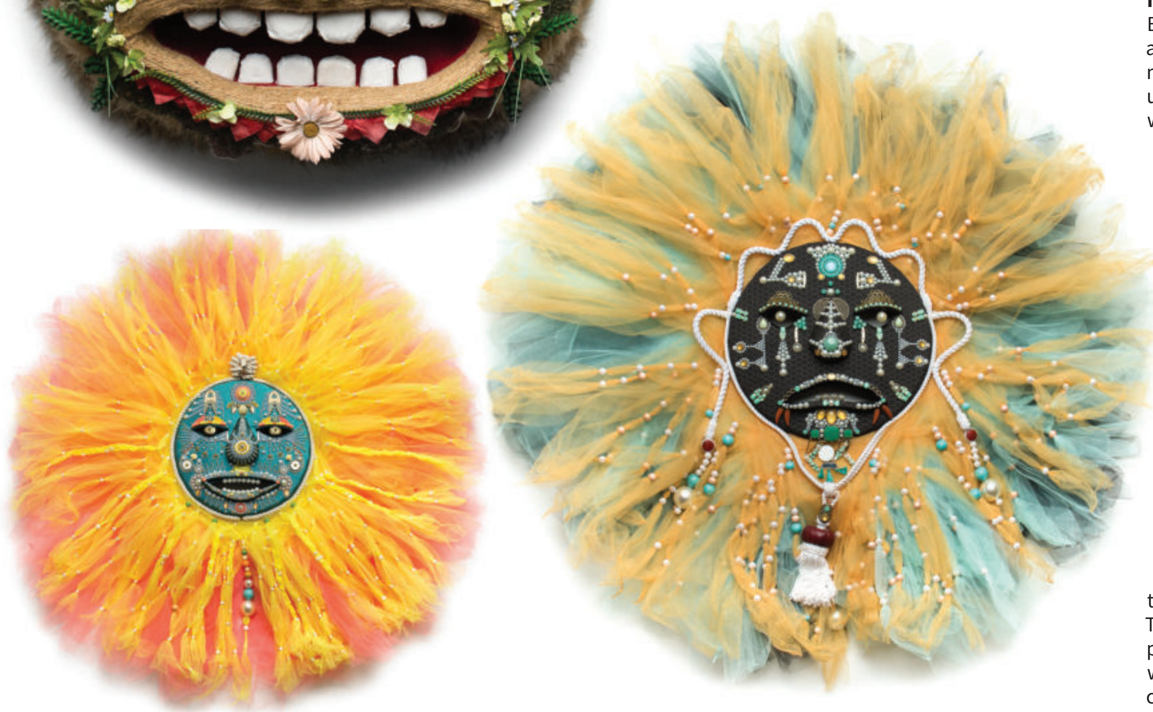
It wasn't until he relocated to New Orleans four years ago to live with his partner and work in the film industry that Bim's art evolved into intricate mask work. The opulent energy of the Mardi Gras Indians made an instant impression. "I felt that in my bones," he recalls.

This is a city of mask lovers. In a time of mask wearing. Bim's art is somehow both stratospherically tethered to that and yet far more elusive.

Last fall, contemporary art gallery The Front hosted a collection of his work, alternate reality masks and headpieces that caught the attention of well-heeled revelers and ribald denizens of the Crescent City alike. It was Bim's first experience with being recognized "from Instagram." A weird feeling, he admits.







"If you come into this town even briefly, and you don't walk away a changed person, I don't know what happened, you know?" Bim says. "For me, the influence has been very direct."

The designer also draws inspiration from his parents' birthplace in Colombia. That country's rich boldness of color and decoration is felt in every mask. Similarly, past psychedelic experiences taking mushrooms and DMT have helped him push his art beyond the ordinary.

"Hallucinating made me realize that every object has an outline," he recalls. "And that you can always go further and further with the details of things, and that's something I like to take with me to creating."

Pena is at work on a new batch of masks, each with its own history and legend and power — world-building, he calls it — but Bim has his eye on full creature creation and animatronics, too, perhaps for films.

Like the costume lineage of the tricksters that kept both kings and kindred commoners in good spirits for centuries, Bim's masks encourage a closer embrace of playfulness and giving chase to whimsy, a collective time for dreaming while awake, and for celebrating the colors of the world in brand new ways — whether there is an official Mardi Gras or not.

The creative's work is more fundamental to that pursuit than any city proclamation.

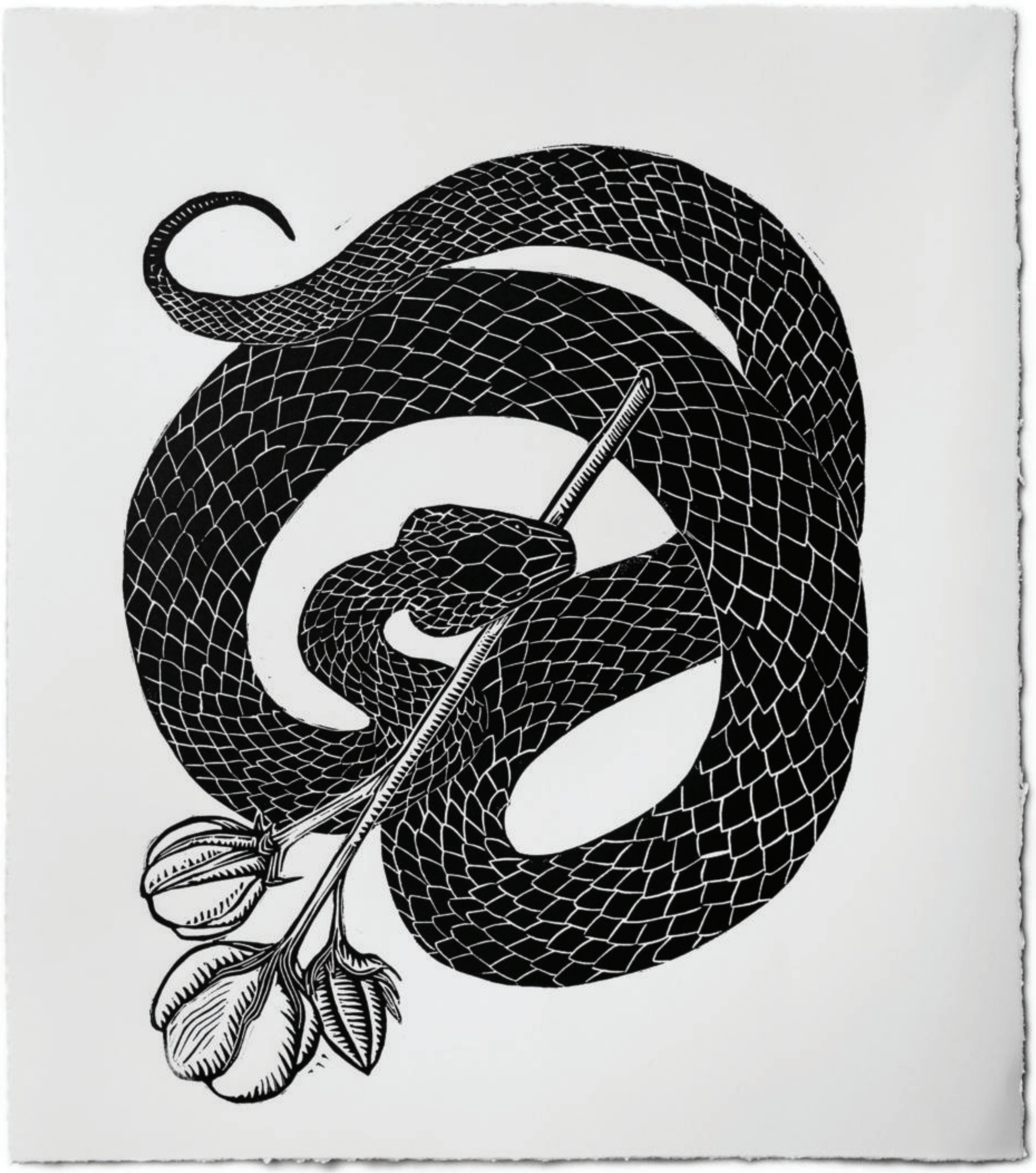
"My hope is that putting on my masks will initiate with their childlike hearts," Bim says. "That it'll pull something out of them that's already there and has just been buried." ■

## Q+A

**When you're not creating, what do you enjoy doing in Louisiana?** For me, it is extremely important that an outsider learn the history of a place if they decide to visit or live there. I love spending time at the libraries. I watch a lot of New Orleans-centric documentaries and films. I love exploring new areas on foot. Sometimes we will grab a six pack and our dogs and go down to the bayou to watch the sun set, or take them to the river or the lakefront. Going to my favorite spot to get red beans on Monday, even though I make my own every week. Talking with the folks at my corner store every day or two, chatting with the neighbors.

**If you could design a custom mask for anyone, who would it be and why?** I think Bjork, Hayao Miyazaki, and Tootie Montana are my folks. The common underlying theme is that I would feel a tremendous need to push myself in a way that I've never done before to make something for them. Bjork is like a real-life bolt of lightning in terms of her energy and spirit. She pushes her art direction and theatrics in a way that no one else does. Miyazaki's animation and films have brought me so much inspiration, and in some ways I'm sure that I can't even tell. Finally, Big Chief Tootie Montana, rest in peace. He was the chief who pushed the masking culture to be more about pageantry and aesthetics — lookin' pretty — in order to shift away from violence and conflict.

**What would your brother think of your new work, if he was alive today?** He would be excited to know I've learned to pick this up and run with it, and he would encourage me to go harder, to do what I'm doing, but more so. Way more so. He always pushed me in that direction. I think his influence and guidance are very apparent in my art.

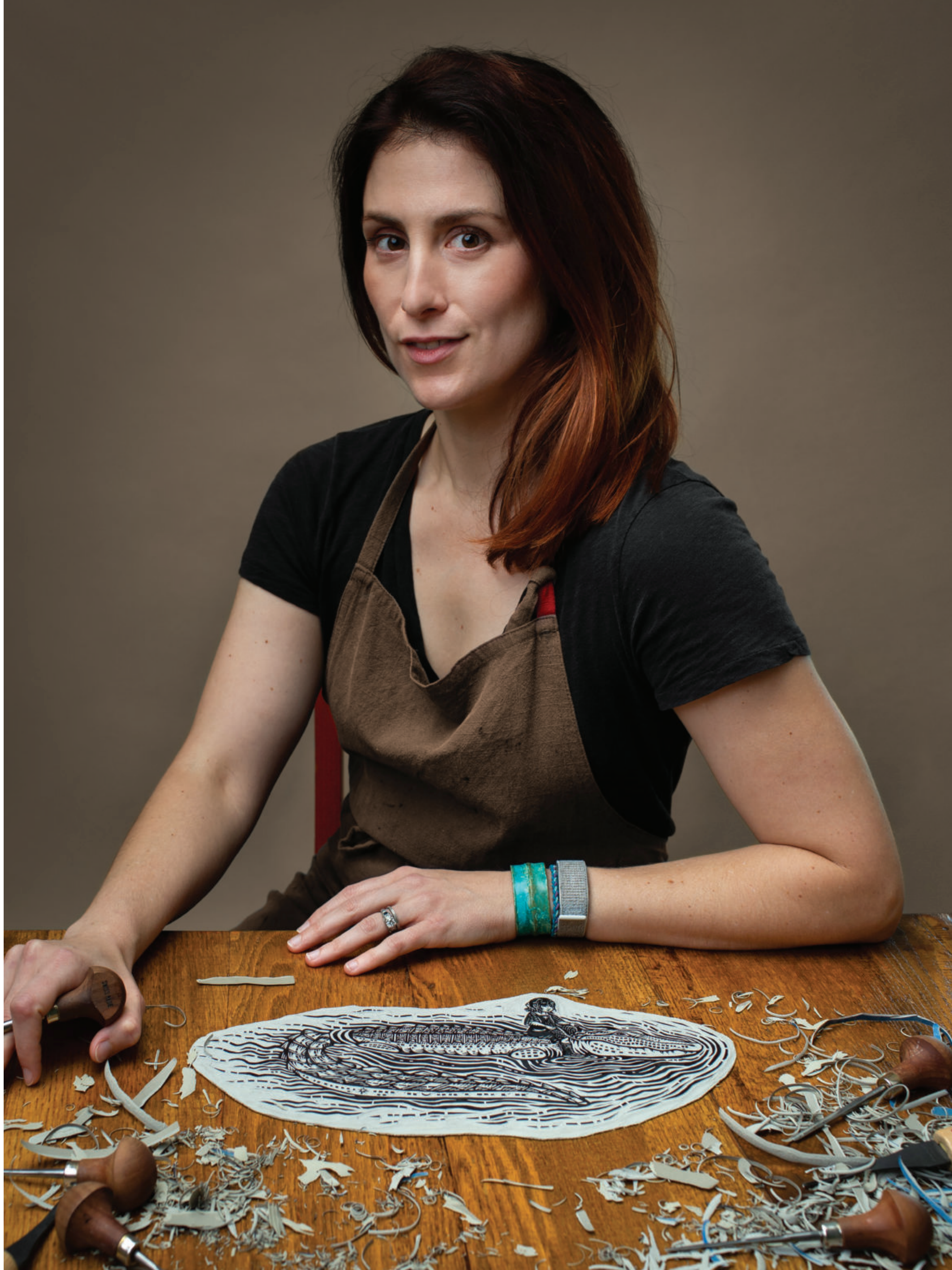


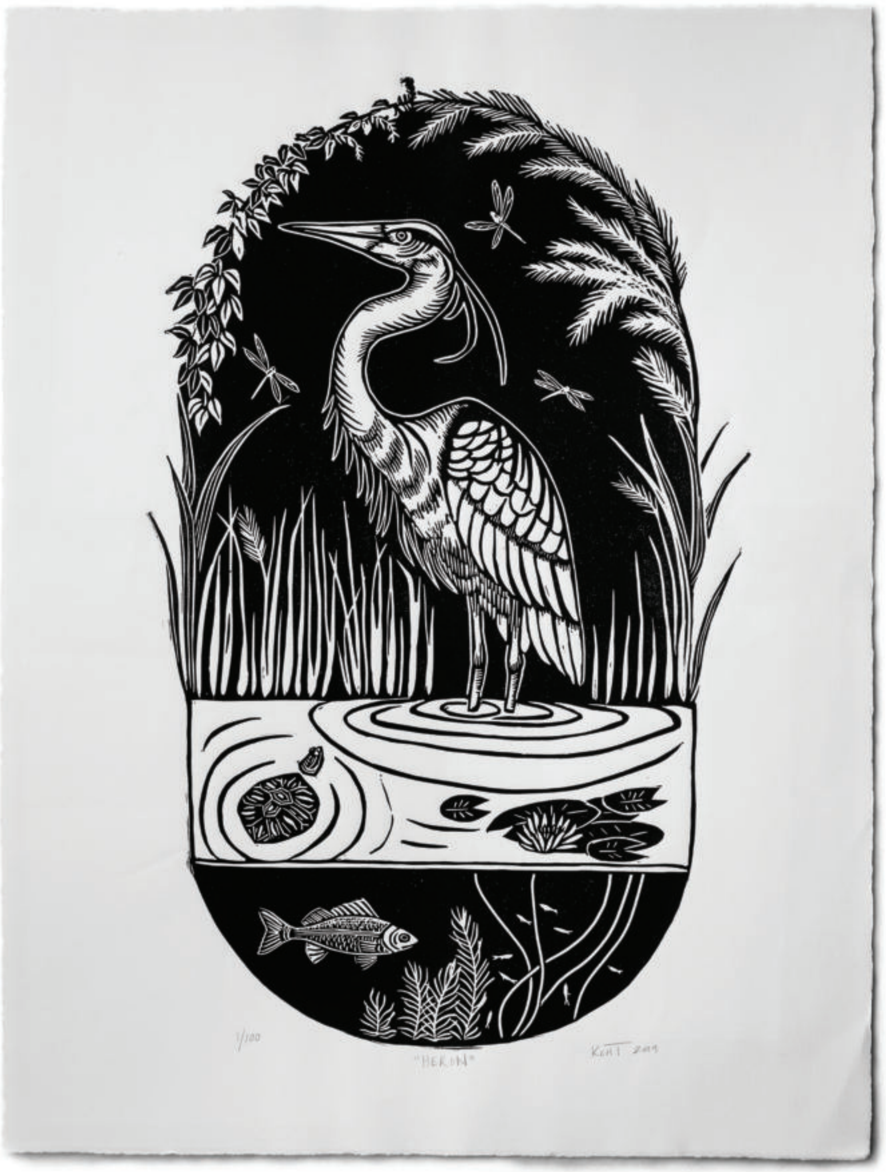
# Freedom of the Press

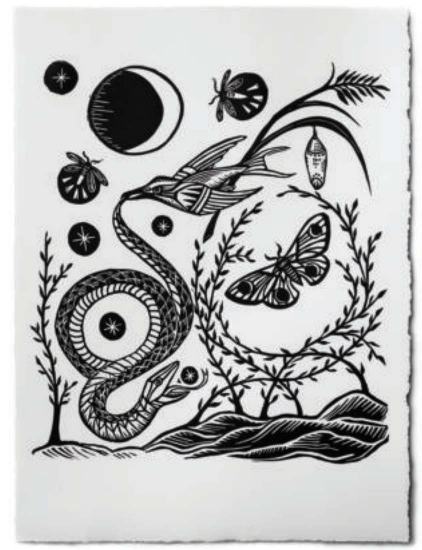
Printmaker Kate Tucker celebrates native species and folklore in rural north Louisiana

BY JEFFREY ROEDEL PHOTOS BY ROMERO & ROMERO

With one bare foot steering the large silver press wheel, and two hands secure around the climbing boy's bottom, his rainboots dangling over her ash-colored shop apron, this tangle of limbs and kinetic energy somehow stands in perfect poise, producing striking prints even so. With fresh ink sinking into paper, and cotton and linen, and then resting there to stir up stories of quiet afternoons, or wild encounters, or even legends.







A typical scene at the Tucker farm house a few short years ago, this kind of assured balancing act remains familiar fuel for Houston-born artist Kate Tucker whose Owl House Studio products have stretched from unique frameable prints, greeting cards and holographic stickers, to all manner of textiles.

From T-shirts and tea towels to azure-hued table runners, placemats and napkins ready for Sunday supper, the pieces are an adventurous blend of offerings from the former environmental engineer who takes inspiration from children's folktales and her new bayou surroundings in equal measure.

Careening swallowtails, lurking gators, onlooking owls and a heron making delicate ripples, coexist with the more mythical and decidedly odd.

Tucker's cruising wood duck paddles along with human legs. Among her menagerie are curious jackalopes, a dazzle of diving mermaids, a prancing, tooth-baring rougaroux, even a cloaked, haunting mystic figure with the tickling label Hot Sauce on my Broom."

Her block prints and products can be ordered directly online or found at the Attic Gallery, the oldest female-owned gallery in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and at Frameworks Gallery in Baton Rouge.

"I like the directness and physicality of the method," Tucker says of block printing. "And that suits my style. I'm not someone who does a lot of gentle shading. I like bold lines."

Tucker's route to tiny Mound, Louisiana, currently the least populated official village in the state with fewer than two dozen residents, was as bold and circuitous as the curving snakes she loves illustrating. After studying both studio art and science at the University of Virginia — where she "found a way to have the most amount of hours in class while getting the least credit for it with the least efficient double-major ever" — Tucker worked in Houston as an environmental scientist specializing in petroleum detection and mediation.

Then she and husband Taft welcomed a daughter, and her career perspective shifted.

"I didn't want her seeing me do something every day that wasn't making me happy," Tucker says. "I realize it's a privileged position to choose a different path, but I wanted to set an example for her of challenging yourself and trying new things."

The Tuckers settled in Mound, near Taft's family farmland, and with a little help from Taft's father Jim, they built Kate's press from scratch.

"People thought we were nuts," Tucker says.

Soon the weird wilds of Louisiana inspired her with every species she encountered on their property. Red-winged blackbirds blew her mind. Hosts of fireflies filled her nights.

"Even if you know all about bioluminescence, it still is just really a wonder to see," she says.

Her environmental science experience informs where her block printing might go, too.

"It's still evolving," she says, "but it's a swirling of science, mythology, wildlife and what I would call a lot of local intrigue."

Few of her works display this more than her mosaic-like scenes, with an almost otherworldly magnetism holding various creatures together. They are choreographed dances of wonder.

One, called Wild Magic, is "just animals and bugs," as she puts it, but to Tucker, the image shines with a mythic, symbolistic quality.

Perhaps this balance is ultimately rendered most in the mind of the viewers, but it must start with Tucker at the press, perhaps bare foot, perhaps thinking about her children's homework or a scraped knee or a loose tooth, and working with traditional inks and cut blocks and illustrations that come together into something more.

"These all mean a lot to me," Tucker muses. "They're about there being something magical and powerful happening every day, but on such a small scale so that you may not realize it." ■

### AT A GLANCE

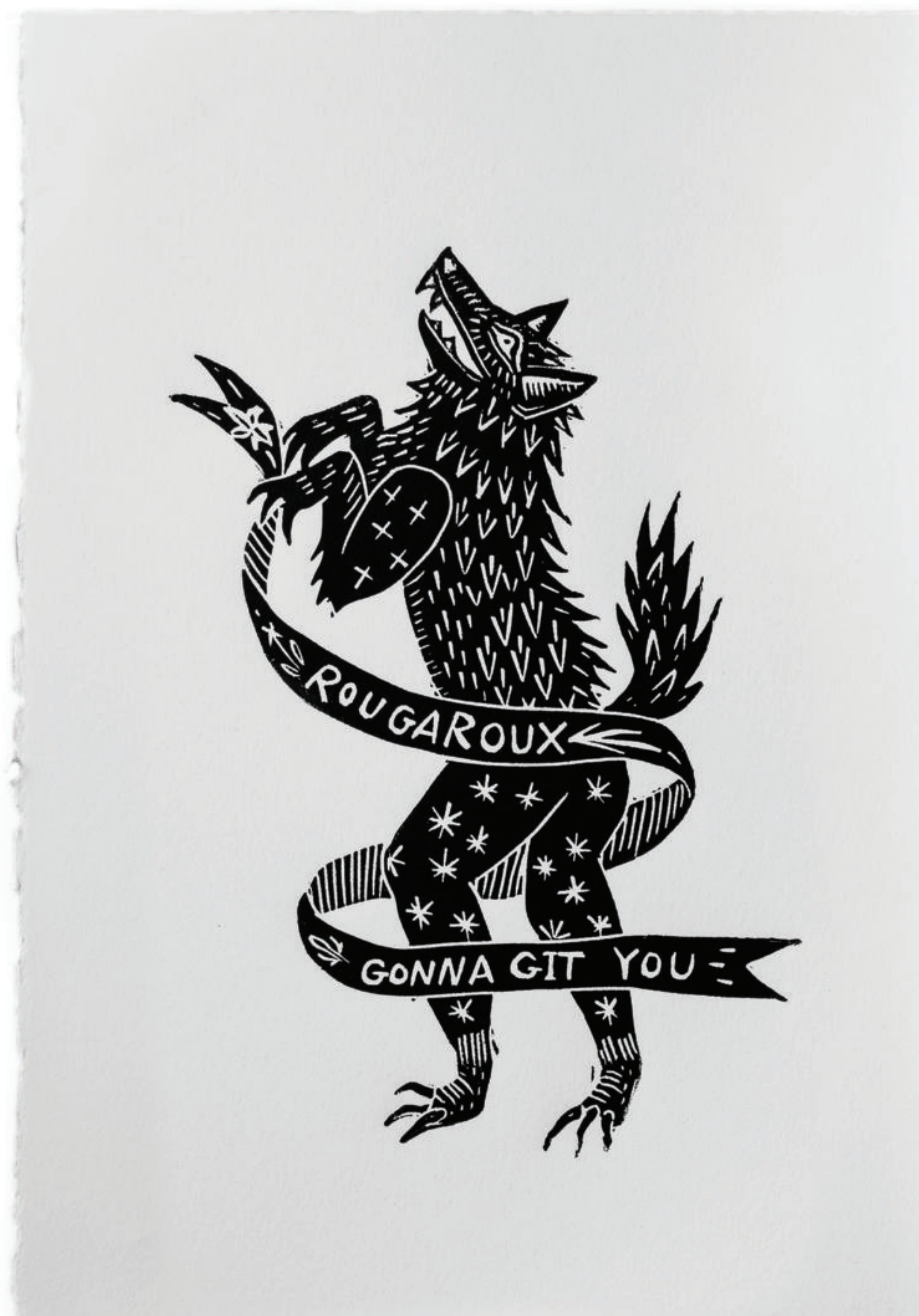
**HOMETOWN**
Mound, Louisiana

**AGE**
38

**OCCUPATION**
Illustrator, product designer

**MEDIUMS**
Printmaking, textiles

**WEB AND SOCIAL**
owlhousedesign.com, @owlhousestudio on Instagram




## Q+A

**What's the biggest misconception about printmaking?** I think many folks are confused about the difference between an art print and a block print. Block printing is old school and very hands on. I carve my blocks by hand, then for each print, I ink the block and roll it through the press. Before I had a press, I would print by rubbing the back of the paper with a wooden spoon. Each block print will have slight variations that make it unique.

**What is your favorite myth or folklore story and why?** As a child I loved The Talking Eggs, based on a Creole folktale, where the characters come across this crazy house on bird legs and the old lady, or witch, that lives inside. Later, I read Baba Yaga from Slavic folklore, and it's virtually identical. I absolutely love when the same story pops up across cultures — which happens surprisingly often — because it just highlights how we all basically want the same things. I was also drawn to the idea that visiting this strange, magic house changes your fate, but only according to your actions and nature.

**And this curiously pops up in your Owl House logo.** The house on bird legs in my logo references that idea, yes, although in the folktales the house has chicken feet. They're a reminder to keep an open mind, especially when you encounter something new and strange.