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Clifton Childree: Carnival Barker

By Carlos Suarez De Jesus Thursday, Nov 24 2011 Comments A A A

During childhood summers at his grandparents' home in Mobile, Alabama, Clifton Childree became obsessed with the silver-screen antics of slapstick icons Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

Little did he imagine he would one day end up sharing equal billing with Chaplin on an international stage. "It's pretty cool to be in a show with him. I used to tell people I was born on the day Chaplin died, but that's just a big lie," the self-taught experimental filmmaker cracks.

One of Miami's most ingenious artists, the 40-year-old Childree produces, helms, and stars in his own slapstick black-and-white films. He combines them with room-engulfing installations based on early-1900s amusement park attractions and carnival side shows that possess the crackled veneer of the macabre and grotesque.

Sitting in his studio across the street from Morningside Park, Childree is surrounded by the props he uses to create the cast of misfits that appear in his films.

Plastic crabs dangle from a coil of rope in a closet. Under them sits a crate full of antique



Clifton Childree

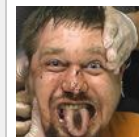
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bottles next to a box stuffed with wigs. Outside, an Indian war bonnet dangles from a nail above a chair cradling the artist's overflowing case of grease makeup and fake blood.

"I'm getting ready to shoot some photos later tonight," Childree says, pointing to a backdrop against a far wall. "I like playing different characters, but a lot of them are drunken-sailor types. I'm probably going to cinch one of those crabs on my nuts." His grandfather, **Jeff Wall**, was a sailor who amused the artist as a tyke with tales of his seafaring adventures across the world.

He also credits his mother, **Barbara Doetsch**, a Catholic nun who left the church to raise a family, as a major creative influence. She often spooled Super8 horror reels for the young Childree at their Plantation home, infecting him with the celluloid bug. Childree's first feature-length film, *The Flew*, distributed along with a vomit bag, was rated one of the top 50 midnight movies of the past decade by *Cahiers du Cinéma* (the film magazine that launched the careers of **François Truffaut** and **Jean-Luc Godard**, among others).

Childree, whose star is rapidly on the rise, had his first solo project in **Austria** this past March after spending two months working on the exhibit, called "Fuck That Chicken From Popeyes."

The Austrians have taken a shine to Childree. The American original has been invited back for a major museum group show, "The Circus as a Parallel Universe," at the Kunsthalle Wien next April.

Billed right behind Chaplin, Childree will display work alongside that of **Federico Fellini**, **Cindy Sherman**, **Bruce Nauman**, **Matthew Barney**, and **Diane Arbus**.

"I'm thinking of showing something like a circus wagon with a calliope and some sort of film component," Childree says.

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