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ART

The Baylor Brand

What's in store
for local artist
Reggie Baylor?

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON



Drinkware, pins and coloring books are a few of the items Baylor's store will offer.



TALL AND DAPPER, with a penchant for impeccably tailored blazers, Reggie Baylor has never fit the stereotype of a paint-spattered artist with a closet full of black clothing. He looks more like the owner of a well-curated lifestyle boutique.

Fittingly, Baylor announced in December that he'll be shuttering his Third Ward studio and opening up a home goods store in Walker's Point, on the first floor of the 152-year-old brick building at 211 W.

Florida St. If all goes as planned, the store will open later this month and will sell furniture and accessories made by local creatives, along with a home goods line of Baylor's own.

Though he's exhibited his larger-than-life, kaleidoscopically colored paintings at the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Pfister Hotel, and he's widely considered one of the most successful artists in Wisconsin, Baylor says he struggled to find buyers

who could afford his work, and the grind was wearing on him. "The last painting I attempted put me over the top, because I realized that it would take me six to eight months to finish. I couldn't afford to make it, and I didn't foresee an opportunity to sell it."

So he decided to follow in the footsteps of market-savvy artists like Takashi Murakami – who made millions collaborating with Marc Jacobs on a line of Louis Vuitton bags – by merchandising his own work. He's digitized about 140 of his compositions and is busily transferring them to towels, mugs and pillows, among many other items. He says that prices for the products will range from about \$15 (for pins) to about \$11,000 (for limited-edition prints), and he hopes to find buyers at both ends of the spectrum. "Ralph Lauren sells clothes at outlet stores, and he sells \$300,000 custom dresses," he explains. "His designs remain true to his brand. And that's what I am. I'm a brand."

Few contemporary artists own up to the importance of personal branding as openly as Baylor. Maybe that's because he considers himself a byproduct of the consumer-conscious pop art movement popularized in the 1950s and 60s, when Andy Warhol convinced the world that Campbell's soup cans were as worthy of large-scale portraits as kings or presidents. And, like Warhol, Baylor understands that the demarcation between highbrow and lowbrow art has always been blurry at best. "I see a Van Gogh painting and recognize it instantly, the same way I see a pair of Nike shoes and recognize them instantly – because Van Gogh has created an aesthetic language that can be recognized without a signature," he says. "I want to make sure that when people see my work, they won't have to look for a signature. They'll understand that it's a Reggie Baylor original."

Baylor hasn't penetrated the public consciousness nearly as deeply as Van Gogh or Nike, of course, but his hard-edged, heavily patterned compositions are easy to identify, and he may be able to reach a wider audience through his store than he did through his studio. And, as the ever-provocative Warhol once quipped, "When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums." ♦