



The Cohn | GNOF | NOLA | Arts Awards is made annually to nonprofits supporting the arts through education and community programs, and includes a special award presented to an individual artist or group from our region whose work in the visual arts, performance, or music is judged to best exemplify how the arts can challenge and inspire us, and in so doing, enrich our lives.

Aron Belka has been nominated by Ian Cohn to be the first winner of the Cohn | GNOF | NOLA | Arts Award. This interview, conducted by Ian, is about his work, his connections to New Orleans, and his participation in the life of his adopted city.

A CONVERSATION WITH ARON BELKA

Ian Cohn: Tell us about yourself. You were born and raised in Utah. What made you want to become an artist, and what brought you to New Orleans?

Aron Belka: I was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. My father is an architect and my mother is a music teacher so I grew up with plenty of creative influence at an early age. When I was young I spent a lot of time in the mountains and was interested in wildlife so my art at that age reflected that. I attended Utah State University and initially studied to be a Wildlife Biologist, but I was always making art and eventually switched to an art degree emphasizing in illustration. My wife, Dr. Lina Moses, and I (we are now separated) met at Utah State University. After graduating we moved to Portland, Oregon, then in 2002 she accepted a job with the New York State Department of Health and we moved to Albany, New York. In 2004 Lina applied and was accepted into the Tulane School of Public Health graduate program, which brought us to New Orleans.

We met after my wife Vicki and I admired one of your paintings included in a group show at the Ogden Museum in 2015. That portrait, "Papeh Sow" has an interesting back story, which reveals how you've used art to engage your audience in a wide range of public issues of interest to you.

In 2005, Lina began traveling to West Africa to do research on Lassa Fever for her graduate work, acquiring her Masters Degree and PhD along the way. That path of research has now spanned over fifteen years, with work done primarily in Sierra Leone. Lina worked with a local field team who became like a second family. Mohamed Sow, or "Papeh Sow", was a driver for the team. I've never travelled to Sierra Leone, so the portrait of Papeh Sow was equivalent to a portrait of a distant family member whom I'd never met. It was a creative way for me to become familiar with a life and family that I had little connection to. That portrait was made in early 2014, prior to the height of the most widespread Ebola outbreak in history. Lina and her team, along with many other close colleagues, were part of the response effort during the outbreak. I created subsequent portraits associated with the West African Ebola crisis.



Papeh Sow
6' X 6'
Private Collection

Clearly, you are drawn to subjects because of the stories they can tell - through the lens of your art. Tell us about some of them - people from all walks of life in New Orleans; Jazz greats; the landscapes, waterscapes, wetlands...

Up until 2013 I hadn't explored much outside of New Orleans. My first solo exhibit was in 2015 at LeMieux Galleries and was titled "Working the Wetlands." I used that exhibit to explore the wetland landscape of Southern Louisiana and the gulf coast, specifically focusing on the fishing and shrimping communities from Delacroix to Venice to Grand Isle to Delcambre. I spoke with shrimpers about climate change, hurricanes, and the competition with imported farm raised shrimp, and participated in the "blessing of the shrimping fleet" in Delcambre, Louisiana. I created large paintings of those people and places hoping to highlight under represented subjects. The woman selling fish at the Vietnamese market at 5am on Saturdays in New Orleans East; the retired shrimper from Larose who comes from generations of shrimpers and threw in the towel to become a welder because he lost faith in the future of the industry; a shell of a shrimping vessel decomposing at an abandoned dock in Venice Louisiana where Katrina ended it's service. Since the creation of that body of work I have continued to focus on overlooked, or less thought of subject matter, making large paintings that inescapably address the viewer. This includes subjects from Sierra Leone impacted by the 2014 Ebola crisis either through the response effort or through contact of infected individuals or both. It includes an exhibit about the race horse, the brave jockey's and the working men and women behind the scenes that care for and train the horses. I returned to the gulf coast to create a body of landscapes, some of which show the alarming loss of land and affects of climate change. And I've continued my exploration of contemporary portraits including twenty cohesive paintings of local New Orleans artists that was exhibited at the Marietta Cobb Museum of Art titled, "Represent: Depicting Creatives in the 504."

You've now received a certain amount of public recognition for your art. Tell us about the highlights: awards, residency programs, gallery representation, private/public commissions, museum exhibitions...and don't forget winning the Bombay Sapphire national competition, which led to a commission for you to paint a public mural in New York City of a NOLA jazz great.

I've exhibited in numerous venues including the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the Alexandria Museum of Art, the Huntsville Museum of Art and a solo exhibition at the Marietta/Cobb Museum of Art in Georgia. I won the Juror's Choice Award at the 2017 Huntsville Museum of Art's Red Clay Survey and was awarded the grand prize at the 2015 Bombay Sapphire Artisan Series Finale during SCOPE Miami. The Artisan Series prize granted me a solo booth exhibit at SCOPE New York and the opportunity to paint a mural of Allen Toussaint in New York City. I was an artist in residence at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans in 2016, and at the Cill Rialaig Project in Ireland in 2019. My paintings hang in numerous private and public collections, including the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation, the University of Rhode Island, the Alexandria Museum of Art and the Huntsville Museum of Art. I am represented by LeMieux Galleries in New Orleans and Quidley & Company in New England and Florida.

How has living in New Orleans influenced your life, the direction you've chosen to take through your art, and how your art has evolved?

When we came to Louisiana I was mainly creating abstract work. We moved here in August of 2004 and a year later Katrina hit. It was a time of reflection about economic disparities, people left behind, and equity. That along with the unique traditions and culture of New Orleans nudged me to make large portrait paintings, often highlighting the "overlooked" and under served. The shift to large portraits and representation inspired new painting techniques and style changes, while retaining some of the abstract qualities from my earlier work. What has followed has been an exploration of large landscape paintings, my contemporary take on the horse and it's role at a historical New Orleans venue, and the continuation of contemporary portraits that include West Africans, musicians, the homeless, and a series of artists who have shaped the growing contemporary art scene of New Orleans, Louisiana



Contact Tracing
Private Collection



Allen Toussaint mural
Lafayette Street in New York City

Finally, tell us a bit about how you've been engaged with the local arts community (including performance, music, craft or culinary as well as fine arts), and how you might be able to use this recognition to benefit others.

I have been accepted into the Ogden Museum's annual "Louisiana Contemporary" exhibit four years in a row and have donated and participated in the live auction for their annual "Oh What a Night" fundraiser gala every year since 2017. I consistently contribute to the mission of the Link Stryjewski Foundation helping New Orleans youth by donating paintings to their annual Bal Masque fundraiser, and I have two large scale paintings of Allen Toussaint and Tootie Montana on permanent display at Cochon restaurant. I've worked with Christy Wood and Jordan Blanton at LeMieux Galleries for almost ten years participating in thoughtfully curated group exhibitions and fundraisers, and through donated artwork I've raised money for several charities and institutions including Ebola Survivor Corp, Cafe Reconcile, ALAS, Grace at the Greenlight, and NOCCA. I'm proud to call myself a New Orleanian and regularly enjoy the live music, the food, the St. Claude and Julia street art openings, the unique traditions and culture in our communities, and happily contribute my services the best I can to add to that culture.



Aron Belka in his Joan Mitchell Center NOLA studio,
20 March 2016 // Photo © Ian J. Cohn, 2016