



Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield



Photo by Maria Rodriguez

Artist/juggler/fire-eater Owen Baker Flynn with one of 16 whimsical benches he's painted for Children's Fairyland.

Bench press

Unlike most visual artists, Owen Baker Flynn doesn't mind if you sit on his art. In fact, he encourages you to park yourself on one of the 16 Fairyland benches — each of them a whimsical original that he's painted over the last six years.

Owen, whose website describes him in a Venn diagram as being at the intersection of nerd and juggler, is a Fairyland favorite who performs here often. And he tells us that although he has performed more than 500 shows at San Francisco's Pier 39, and later this year will have juggled at 100 libraries, we're *his* favorite.

"There's a lot to be cynical about in the world," he says, "but Fairyland's attitude is never cynical."

Owen began cartooning in high school and took some art classes in college while majoring in theater studies. He acted, did voiceover work, and performed as a mime, but was considering quitting it all in 1998. That's when Fairyland offered him a gig.

Here he found appreciative audiences: parents love his humor, and the kids love his fire-eating and other antics.

Six years ago Owen asked us if he could take home one of the tired-

looking benches his audiences sat on so he could "paint something goofy" on it. Of course we said yes. Little did we know that that bench and many others would become magical fixtures at our park — perfect examples of our founders' mission to have "a surprise around every corner."

Owen painted the first bench to look as though it had tufted cushions on it. The image has now been worn away completely, and its refurbishment will have to wait — Owen still has three benches to go before he starts all over again.

Owen's favorite bench depicts a stuffed tiger (his only recurring character, based on his son's "Tigger" toy) reading a Superman comic book. On the tiger's bookshelf is a row of books, all of them the first in their series ("A Is for Alibi," "The Cat in the Hat," and so on).

"That was the breakout bench," Owen recalls. All benches since 2008 represent the tiger in action: reading "No More Monkeys Jumping on the Bed" to a bed full of active stuffed toys; on a gondola in Venice; in the air after a humpback whale has displaced the water where he was swimming.

My favorite bench is one painted in pointillist style. "Merci, M. Seurat" portrays a wondrous world

where Snow White, a giraffe, Humpty Dumpty and other characters are enjoying a lakeside outing. Sadly, Owen has retired that style.

"I will never again do a painting with just dots," he says emphatically.

Another of our favorites is a riff on Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks."

"He's my favorite artist who doesn't draw comic books," Owen says.

The painting shows an unusual crowd sitting around the iconic painting's counter: Red Riding Hood, the Tin Woodsman, Pinocchio and the Mad Hatter.

Another of Owen's benches depicts a realistic-looking cactus. He just wanted to see if people would sit on it. They do.

Owen's bench habit hasn't been easy on his family. The six-foot-long benches first live in the bedroom until ready for painting, at which point they're moved into the kitchen. "For years, when we've invited people over, they've had to walk around the benches," he says.

Owen's benches have taken on another life as well: as designs for bookmarks given out at libraries and as his calling card. The back of the card reads: "At this point I'd like to thank my wife and two kids who in the past six years since I started painting the benches at Children's Fairyland have never, EVER said 'OH NO! Not ANOTHER bench!' when I brought them home."

Owen's first bench of 2012 was recently installed at Fairyland. "51 Points" depicts the word "Fairyland" spelled out on Scrabble tiles. Directing the tiles is the paw of ... a tiger, of course.

We love it, and we always enjoy seeing the way kids and parents start lively conversations around the unexpected art they find on the benches. We stand in awe of the wit and artistry of our very favorite juggler/nerd, Owen Baker Flynn.

To see photos of the benches, visit Owen's website: ob-f.com.

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