French Quarter artist looks for local space to create, live

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It took a massive hurricane to uproot artist Amzie Adams from the French Quarter, a place he hadn’t left for 35 years. Adams has found a temporary home at the Blue Moon Saloon Guest House, but he’s looking for a place to buy or rent so he can stay in Lafayette.

For decades, Adams was a familiar sight on French Quarter streets, where he stood out among eccentric Quarterites, always wearing a medieval snood, a draped velvet hat, over his flowing gray hair. These days, Adams, also a musician, mask-maker, actor and filmmaker, can be spotted on downtown Lafayette streets wearing his papier mâché top hat, himself an expression of his art.

It all started when he was a child growing up in New Jersey, when he became interested in assembling and painting model cars.

"If you go too positive, people will go negative on you, so I became a reverse engineer of the social stigmata."

Adams’ work can be viewed at www.insleyart.com, the Web site of the Insley Art Gallery in New Orleans, whose most recent show was titled “All Amzie All the Time,” featuring some of Adams’ work, but mostly the works of more than 40 other artists and photographers who created more than 140 depictions of Adams. The owners, Charlene and Bill Insley saved his life by talking him into evacuating, he said.

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Writer D. Eric Bookhardt reviewed the show for the June edition of Gambit Magazine.

“Amzie’s own work is of the visionary variety, but his best architectural studies, such as Old Custom House and Marie Laveau House of Voodoo, are not unlike James Michalopoulos in their wavy-gravy panache. His portraits suggest spontaneous outbursts of creative mania, and these may be closer to the real, inner Amzie,” Bookhardt wrote.

Adams blithely accepts the gallery’s homage to his artistic persona and chatted amiably Tuesday in back of the Blue Moon while he deftly sketched, from memory, an outline of the Cornstalk Fence Hotel on Royal Street in the French Quarter, with a white pencil on a black canvas. He then turned it upside down on an easel and starting applying acrylic paint.

“When you turn it upside down, it becomes abstract,” he said. “I paint from dark to light, and paint light into the darkness.” Within minutes, Adams painted in a blue moon as his primary light source, adding more shades of blue to show light reflecting off the building and famous fence in front of it.

“I don’t use photographs, I paint from my mind,” he said. “It’s kind of like playing lead guitar on your head.” Living in the Quarter was different from the rest of the country, Adams said, and he bought his first cell phone only when he left New Orleans.

“In the Quarter, you don’t need credit cards or even money because you can barter everything,” he said, but living in New Orleans came with a high price. He suffered a broken arm when he was mugged two years ago during Mardi Gras and was told he’d never paint or play guitar again. Although he said he’s in constant pain, Adams, who says he’s “61 and having fun,” hasn’t slowed down yet, but he wants to settle down in Lafayette. He said he’s desperate for a place to rent or buy, “or I would be fine,” and can be reached at 296-2093.

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