





BY KELLY KENDALL

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most compelling local artist of them all? Mab Graves, the fairy-tale enchantress of waifs and strays from Carmel to Cairo, has the magic touch, but also a (pink-haired) head for building a charming brand.



NCE UPON A TIME” seems like a good place to begin a story about Mab Graves, the self-taught, bubblegum-haired Pop Surrealist and growing object of widespread curiosity who looks as if she were sprung to life from one of her works by the flick of a magic wand. And, in a professional sense, she was—born from the paintings, sketches, and sculptures in the gorgeously cluttered, turquoise-walled, second-story studio of a converted 1880s tavern in Indianapolis’s Fountain Square neighborhood, where Graves lives and works. Friends and fans, who get frequent glimpses of this deliciously twee space on social media, refer to it as “The Forest.”

A new visitor to The Forest might describe her artwork as “girly.” Maybe even “cute.” But a closer look reveals something more. The brunette cherubs in the artist’s sweet Victorian-style Valentine cards? They’re glaring, not beaming, and blood drips from their pouting lips. The fluffy felted-wool fuchsia poodle with big blue eyes and a hairdo like a ’60s beehive? He’s a Vampoodle, with fangs sharpened to a fine point—and on second thought, the beast’s peepers don’t look particularly friendly. And *Snow White in the Black Forest*, a print featuring the storybook heroine surrounded by woodland creatures? The fox and the possum have their jaws open, as if ready to chomp; trees in the background frown in anger; and Snow White’s eyebrows are raised in fear.



This sugary-sweet, yet creepy, aesthetic—like pink cotton candy laced with just a little arsenic—has won Graves, 30, worldwide success. Years ago, her type of art might have been met with a critical sneer from serious pundits who would have deemed it “lowbrow.” But now, Lowbrow—capital “L,” thank you—is a respected art movement all its own. Graves’s petite paintings, which have hung in galleries all over the country and are headed to Miami Beach later this year for Art Basel—the international fair that also holds shows in Hong Kong and Basel, Switzerland—go for several thousand dollars, typically selling out before the exhibits even open. The more-affordable prints, notecards, stickers, and other goodies in her Etsy shop have now shipped to buyers in more than 70 countries. Some members of “Mabsteam,” as Graves fans call themselves, even set their alarms to snap up new merch the second it goes on sale, knowing it will disappear fast—like a series of melamine plates she did last year, featuring characters as diverse as the Bride of Frankenstein and her favorite real-life person in the world, 6-year-old nephew Ransom. Those plates are now going for \$52 to \$145 apiece on eBay. And a T-shirt line that Graves collaborated on with Vardagen, the local tee shop, launched in April and sold out in two days.

How’s all that for “cute”?

“Pop Surrealism appeals to a large audience because it has something for everyone,” explains Mike Barclay, director of exhibitions at the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art. “It can be lighthearted and subversive, twisting elements of Old Masters and pop icons into something new that appeals to anyone, with or without a formal art education.”

Perhaps the ultimate modern-day measure of Graves’s popularity is her Instagram presence: 272,000 followers and counting. Compare that to the 224,000 people who follow former Colts punter and budding comedian Pat McAfee; 117,000 devotees of Pacers center Myles Turner’s account; and 46,400 followers of charismatic IndyCar driver Helio Castroneves.

Here, in the carefully curated alt-reality of social media, devotees come in droves to admire what might be the artist’s greatest creation: Mab Graves.

MAB WAS NOT born a Mab. Somewhere along the line, she jettisoned her birth name, which she won’t reveal, for the moniker of a Shakespearean fairy queen who brings dreams to those who slumber.

Graves experienced an unorthodox childhood somewhere in Central Indiana. (The exact location is yet another closely held secret.) She grew up home-schooled, the second of four girls born in a five-year span, “so we were all really close,” she says. They dressed up in old hoop skirts and mounted grand theatrical productions in their basement, and at night, their parents would read them fairy tales instead of turning on the TV. “Every one of us had a project while we listened—knitting, sewing, drawing,” she says. “I think that has a lot to do with my passion for the combination of creation and stories.”

To this day, Graves won’t have a TV in her home. Curling up to watch *The Handmaid’s Tale* on Hulu on her laptop? Fine. But none of those grating ads that scream at you, or mindless shows that drain your day away. Except for *Swamp People*. Graves has a weakness for *Swamp People*. “When we stay in hotels, we call it Trash TV Time,” she says of herself and her husband. “We’ll get a bunch of chips and Gummi Bears and be like—(makes gobbling sound)—Trash TV Time! I’m waiting for the next episode, and they’re pulling drama out of literally nothing.”

Such are the television tastes of one who was deprived for so long. Although Graves says she’s “so grateful for having grown up that way,” there’s also something about her upbringing that left her feeling adrift in a world she doesn’t quite understand. In that way, she’s a lot like the “waifs and strays” she paints and draws: little girls whose saucer eyes





express innocence, worry, wonder, and pain as they wander through dreamlike landscapes.

"I don't fit in, and I don't understand the rules," says Graves. She points to a 2013 exhibit, "Pretending to be Human," one of several she's done that explored alienation. This one featured young supernatural creatures attempting to pass as regular schoolchildren. "These children were all monsters, basically, where they were trying to fit in and figure it out, but they were literally covered in fur and scales, and there's a little Medusa in school at the chalkboard. She's standing there, getting ready to read this story she wrote about her family, and you can see this desperation in her face, hoping to be understood, but facing this firing squad." Graves can relate oddly well. For instance, doing a single in-person appearance like she did for her T-shirt line, to talk to fans—people she knows already love her, or are at least eager to—takes such an emotional toll on her, a "super loner," that she limits the events to once or twice a year. "I think growing up like I did in a very alternative way, anytime I talk to people about my childhood, they're like, 'This was in America? In the 1990s and 2000s?' I don't find anyone that I have anything in common with. And I don't understand a lot of music and pop culture. It's searching for a place where I fit in."

For eight years now, art has helped her assimilate. After sketching and illustrating practically nonstop since she was old enough to hold a crayon, Graves became a "secret painter" at the age of 21, working various jobs—bartender, florist, kids' book consultant—around Indianapolis, where she arrived in 2007, before making her first real foray into the gallery world in 2009. That's when a guy she had recently started dating, photographer Larry Endicott, urged her to take part in a group show at the Harrison Center for the Arts. The event happened to be attended by one of the city's biggest arts patrons, who grabbed one of Graves's paintings off the wall and carried it around for the evening. "Mab was shocked and worried, but I told her she now had a collector," recalls Endicott, now Mab's husband, whom she calls "Laurence the Prince," or simply "LP."

(Laurence the Prince might as well have ridden up to Graves atop a galloping white steed, so neatly does he fit the archetype of romantic hero. The two met briefly while she was bartending in Broad Ripple, where a mutual friend tried to set them up; they finally got together for drinks a week or two later. "I didn't even remember what he looked like," Graves told now-defunct local arts website Sky Blue Window in 2015. "A cute guy waved me over, and I was like, *Nice!*" After an hour of cocktails, Endicott leaned across the table and kissed her, and they've been together ever since. "One date and soul mates," said Graves.)

Like the meet-cute with LP, the local art scene fell hard for Graves after her Harrison Center premiere. A surge in traffic overwhelmed her website, mabgraves.com, to the point that it crashed, even though, at that point, it didn't offer anything for sale—not even a sticker. "[Success] came overnight," says Graves. "Which never happens, for anyone."

Graves stuck to the Harrison Center for a coveted solo launch, an exhibit she called "The Adventures of Harlow, the Raven King, and several possums." To this day, though her work appears in galleries from L.A. to Rome and everywhere in between, she reserves her "full solo shows" for Indy—usually the Monster Gallery, the space she and Endicott carved out on the first floor of the couple's renovated Fountain Square home. It's important to Graves to keep her career as local as possible. "Because everything awesome goes to New York or L.A.," she says. "And I love Indianapolis. The reason I'm here is the people. They're genuine."

SINCE HER IMPROBABLE—fairy-tale?—debut, Graves has emerged as a pioneer in the still relatively young genre of Pop Surrealism, a term that the artist embraces even as she thinks it "doesn't really make any sense." Rooted in the Lowbrow art movement, which originated in late-1970s Los Angeles, Pop Surrealism is a newer term, apparently first surfacing in the name of a 1998 exhibit in Connecticut and repeated in an

ensuing write-up by *The New York Times*. It was dubbed “a growing underground movement” by art magazine *Juxtapoz* as recently as last year.

“As Surrealism had before it, the Pop Surrealist movement strives to look beyond everyday reality in order to represent enchanted, mysterious worlds through sensuous and fantastical imagery,” says Max Weintraub, gallery director at the Herron School of Art and Design. “Pop Surrealism, however, is firmly grounded in the popular-cultural iconography of comic books, science fiction, tattoo art, and street art. It’s defined as much by a strong do-it-yourself, countercultural ethos as it is its dreamlike aesthetic, vivid color palette, and cryptic—at times, even Gothic—symbolism.”

Graves is OK with the whole Pop Surrealism thing, though she prefers “Dreamchild Neverist,” a term she made up. “It’s more descriptive of my style, and it’s a completely nonsensical word,” she says. “I think that art labeling is pretty ridiculous and arbitrary. At the end of the day, you either like something or you don’t.” But Dreamchild Neverist is useful shorthand for how Graves sees her work: “It’s kind of an amalgamation of narrative storybook style, with a touch of ’60s kitsch mod, and then a hefty dose of classical landscapes and old-style painting. It’s sort of just a mash-up.”

The critics can call her work whatever they want—Graves doesn’t really create for them, anyway.

“I love painting things that make me laugh,” she says. “Especially with the times we live in, I want to create places of beauty and strangeness in a world that can be pretty dark and harsh,” she says. “I think people connect to that. Because people are sad. They’re tired of opening up Facebook and seeing a constant barrage of sad stories and stress and pain and so much worry.”

To wit, Graves makes it a point to mail out several gifts a week to friends and shoppers, maybe a stranger who has posted on her Instagram account and seems to need a lift—anything from a “Consider Yourself Hugged Today” note to an original painting.

One recent lucky recipient of Graves’s generosity was Carmen Jones, a Broad Ripple admin at a Carmel accounting firm. Jones had dreamed of owning a limited-edition print of the artist’s *Candyland* once she could afford it, ever since she discovered Graves’s work while browsing the bins at Homespun boutique. “I came across these paper-doll prints,” says Jones. “They were very cute, but there was something else to them—an oddness in the eyes, maybe. You could easily give them to a child, and they’d fit in with any other dolls the kid would have. But there is also a depth to them. I knew there was way more to this artist than just cute dolls.” As soon as Jones got home, she looked up Graves online, found *Candyland* and other works, and was completely blown away. “She blends beauty and darkness in a near-perfect balance,” says Jones. “Neither overwhelms the other—they live in gorgeous harmony.”

When I recount Jones’s anecdote to Graves, the artist’s



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eyes instantly grow misty (something they tend to do). She quickly hunts down a copy of *Candyland* (a twisted take on the classic board game that sells for \$200 at her Etsy shop) in her apartment, dashing off a signature in exquisite gold script, and packing it off to Jones, whom she’s never met.

ONE SATURDAY EVENING In April, the artist sat at a folding table at the Vardagen store in Castleton Square Mall as shoppers rifled through the brand-new Mab Graves T-shirt collection. On her own slim frame, which clocks in at just under 5-foot-4, was one of her own creations: the “Sick Girls Club” tee, featuring a waiflike nurse and wide-eyed pills. The peachy-pink shirt, just a few shades off from the color of Graves’s trademark hair, offered the only clue to the pain and anxiety beneath her warm grin that night, as she beamed with apparent joy and posed for pictures with every fan who approached her.

“Ohhhhhh,” she says later, recalling that night and the trauma that in-person events put her through. “They’re one of the most difficult parts of my job. I can’t even eat the day before.” She pauses. “It’s like, *These people drove and got out of the car to come and meet you!*” Still, overcoming her shyness to be

“on” for fans gets exhausting, which is why—despite her raw, sometimes painful honesty with her Instagram followers, and her frequent updates there—personal appearances like this are rare. “It takes me six to eight months to recover, usually.”

Graves has suffered from arthritis since the age of 14, and it gets just a little bit worse every day. While she manages the pain in her hands as best she can with steaming-hot Epsom-salt baths and paraffin dips, she knows that at some point, she’ll no longer be able to wield a paintbrush or pencil. For an artist, this is a death knell. But our story’s brave heroine is undaunted. “I look at it as a gift,” she says of the disease. “It makes each of my works more precious.”

Then there’s the endometriosis, which she’s been battling for 11 years, a disease that has added to her feeling of isolation from the rest of the world. It’s a frequently painful disorder in which the tissue that normally lines the uterus grows outside of it instead, which can lead to cysts, scar tissue, and adhesions, with organs sticking together (as they did in Graves’s case). After enduring agony for weeks on end at a time, countless trips to doctors who dismissed her as a hypochondriac or possible junkie in search of pain meds, and three surgeries, she made what she calls “one of the most painful choices I’ve had to make,” and had a radical hysterectomy in December. Mab Graves—famous for her portraits of little girls; a loving babysitter of her own younger sisters, according to her father; a woman who would be a nanny if she weren’t an artist; and a beyond-doting aunt to Ransom, whom she treasures above all other living beings—will never have children of her own.

“I love kids and have always wanted kids,” she says. But 2016 was her worst year yet in terms of pain, bleeding, nausea, and vomiting. Then chemotherapy failed. And so she had her fourth, most devastating, **CONTINUED ON PAGE 177**



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surgery. “I had thought I was ready,” she says. “But my mom had endo, and she’d gone through 10 years of fertility treatments and eventually she had me and my sisters, and I’ve always been holding out that some miracle would happen for me.” The realization that that miracle wasn’t coming hit Graves harder than expected—and left her, once again, with the feeling that she didn’t belong. “All the women I know who are going through menopause are going through it naturally,” she says. “And all my friends my age are pregnant.”

Determined to be a voice for endometriosis sufferers—the disease affects about 10 percent of women of childbearing age, according to The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists—Graves has posted frequently and in depth on social media about what she’s been going through. There are two photos of her from her hospital bed in December: a close-up where she looks sassy in glittery cat-eye glasses and her signature Stila lipstick in bright “Beso” red, and another shot where she’s make-up-free, hooked up to IVs, clavicle bones protruding, and appearing so weak, it seems it’s all she can do to form the “peace” sign she’s flashing. She has become online pals with fellow endo sufferer Lena Dunham (the *Girls* star and creator sent her a box of healing stones in April) as a result of them both going public with their struggles. “I wanted to be like, *I’m raising my hand*,” says Graves. “So many other girls live with this, but at night you still feel alone.”

Graves, however, is quick to point out the good that came out of her endo treatments: When she became so weak that she could no longer hold up a palette and canvas to paint, she taught herself (in about 15 minutes) to needle-felt. She churned out an entire exhibit of felted sculptures, “Dinokitties: A Natural History,” for a New Orleans gallery this spring, and has also crafted mermaids, possums, and the aforementioned Vampoodles. “I just obsessively create to try to

escape the pain,” she says. “Felting completely saved my sanity, because when I get into something and start working, I just pour all of myself into it. Once you see it start to take shape, you think, *Ooh, I can’t wait to see it!*”

LIKE MANY PEOPLE in Graves’s life, her manager is known by a fanciful name: Darcy Danger. (Would you expect anything less?) Danger invented her moniker with the help of a few friends because she absolutely hated her last name, since, she says, she never even knew her father. After the rechristening, she was browsing on Etsy when Mab Graves’s shop popped up. Danger, who lives in New Jersey, instantly fell in love with Graves’s signature waifs and strays and decided to welcome one into her home. (“People don’t buy my paintings,” writes Graves in her Shop Policies section on Etsy. “They adopt my little girls. My greatest goal in letting my darlings go, is that they will pass from my loving arms to yours. To delight, inspire, and vaguely creep you out.”)

Graves is more serious about that than you might think, by the way. “One of the driving forces behind why I create is to love and to nurture,” she says. “I’ve always wanted to be a mother—but I always wondered, if I did, would I stop being an artist? Because I know I would pour everything into my kids.” That need to nurture, she says, is central to her desire to make art—to the point that she routinely cries when she leaves her creations behind, like at a gallery show, when she knows her waifs or Dinokitties won’t be coming home with her.

But Danger was enchanted, and what she calls “a beautiful friendship” ensued. “Like old-fashioned pen-pals, we would write each other nearly every night, telling stories and sharing secrets,” she says. Eventually, it dawned on the pair that Graves was spending way too much of her workday (15 to 18 hours, by many accounts) tracking orders, packing them up, and shipping hundreds of parcels all over the globe each month. Danger took over the nitty-gritty work of maintaining an online shop to allow the artist to focus more on creating. Now she is Graves’s manager and close friend; the two talk on the phone almost every day. “The best part is when I met Mab’s dad,” says Danger. “He said that I was a long-lost member of their tribe. I grew another heart that day.”

Even with Danger to help her out,

Graves’s friends and family say she still works those same long days, only now she’s drawing, painting, and sculpting more than ever. She taught an illustration class in Seville, Spain, in June, and is booked through 2019 with exhibits, including a solo show of her new paintings, “The Children of the Nephilim,” at her Monster Gallery starting November 4. Less than a week later, some of her other work will go on display in Rome as part of a group exhibit, and shortly after, an intricate Dinokitty sculpture will show at Art Basel in Miami Beach. A second collaboration with Vardagen is in the works, and she’s devoted to keeping her Etsy shop stocked with new stuff.

“I’m so happy,” she says with a smile. “If I were a millionaire and never had to work a day in my life, I would be doing exactly what I’m doing now. And when I was penniless and working three jobs, I was doing the same thing I’m doing now. I’m just letting things unfold.”

Shauta Marsh, cofounder of the Tube Factory artspace, believes good things lie ahead for Graves. “I think she’s a very important artist for the city,” says Marsh. “When she shows other places, she’s representing us in a positive way, and she’s also bringing in artists for us to experience at Monster Gallery at a time when we don’t have many galleries left in the city. We’re lucky to have her living here.” And yes, Marsh is a fan—she owns and “is always finding new things in” a Graves painting of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves that she bought in 2009. Marsh couldn’t afford it at the time, so the artist let her make payments on it.

It’s the sort of kindness that makes Mab’s father, Jack Graves, even happier than he is about her artistic success. “I’m most proud that many find her a source of encouragement, whether for their art or their struggles,” he says. “Besides her artistic gifts, Mab always stood out for her compassion. She gets that from her mother. What most don’t realize is that under that pink mop of hair is a first-class mind.”

The hair, by the way—Graves gets it done at Shag Salon in her neighborhood. The tresses have been pink so long that they’re listed that way on her driver’s license and passport, but she’s plotting yet another creative twist.

“I already have a crazy-old-lady pink beehive wig waiting in the wings,” says Graves of the happily-ever-after she has planned for herself. “I’m going to wear kimonos. It’ll be fabulous.” **P**