

American History | Transcendence | Violence: A Conversation with Joshua Hagler

Joshua American artist Joshua Hagler and I connected last month and have been discussing a range of subjects and common interests since then. He is known for his psychologically-charged paintings that exist in a realm where conventional beliefs about history, Christian mysticism, cultural identity, prophecy, philosophy, his middle American upbringing and the 19th-century exploration of North America are given an opportunity for reinvention.

Joshua lived and worked in San Francisco and then Los Angeles for a total of fifteen years before moving to rural New Mexico in late 2017 as a grant recipient of the year-long Roswell Artist in Residence Program. He was born at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho in 1979 and is a first-generation college graduate with a visual communications degree from the University of Arizona in Tucson. Having not attended an art school or received an MFA, Joshua refers to himself as a working-class artist.



Joshua Hagler



Currently, he is hard at work in the studio preparing for his first UK solo exhibition with Unit London. In “Chimera,” he will present works that attempt to dig beneath various forms of loud political language, including censorship, for clues on how the ubiquity of groupthink informs populist world views on both ends of the spectrum. The artist, in practice, hopes to work into the “noise” to exhume something Other in the physical manner in which the work is made.

In this two-part conversation, we talk about visual culture, literary culture, American history, religion, politics, the methods of re-enchantment in the post-modern secular domain, violence, the spectacle of capitalism, the polarisation of rhetoric, thinkers like Franz Kafka and René Girard, and the creative life...

I was drawn to your art because of its powerful thematic and unique stylistic dimensions, yes, but also because you read voraciously. And that intrigued me. As you might have gathered from my Instagram feed already (I was thrilled when you said you love the stuff I love—thanks!), I am constantly navigating the space between visual and literary culture. Each is equally important to me. I spend a lot of time engaging with painters, sculptors and photographers, and I still manage to have a Kindle overflowing with fiction and non-fiction. Sometimes I feel I mount an assault on my senses by wanting to take in too much—but it’s just never enough.

So what is Word and what is Image to you? What is the interplay between them in your life—and how has that shaped you as an artist and as a person? You are chiefly a creator of Image. How much of a consumer are you of Word and Image, respectively?

Yeah, I get the feeling we have a lot in common in terms of what we’re drawn to subject-wise. I look to the written word and to imagery for everything in terms of how I develop my sense of being in the world, and that, in turn, informs the work that I do. As far as my appetite goes, yeah, I’m pretty insatiable, though, actually, not for the sake of knowledge or worldliness in and of itself, but because of a deep need that I find hard to describe. I don’t know what the need is or where it comes from, but I do know when I’ve seen or read something that meets me in my time of need.

A good poem, for example, recognises its reader; it’s as if you are in a dark room confronted by the sound of breathing. No one can see you but you can’t hide. One knows when contact is made even if one isn’t sure how the contact happens. I’m not interested in being informed so much as transformed. My feeling is that the word and the image are one and the same, each an abstraction of the other, each operating on the other. The task, for me, as an artist, is to hitchhike on the tail end of that operation.



Man Lying in Bed

Here's an example to explain what I mean: Right now I'm working on a book of word and image I'm tentatively calling *The Book of Animals*. On a good day, I read a bit in the morning. Right now, for example, I'm reading *I and Thou* by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Before that I was reading *The Order of Time* by Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli and before that *The Lice* by American poet W. S. Merwin. And in the meantime, I read various articles online about any number of things (some of that reading isn't actually helpful, let's be honest).

So generally these things, as I'm reading, are unlocking a certain pattern of thought for me, which otherwise would not occur. I have a notebook and I jot some things down. Some things turn into poems. I don't make any grand claims about my poetry, but they do illicit certain kinds of imagery. I make a sketch or a small ink study. When I make one I like, I recreate it at a larger scale, sometimes enormous, on canvas. I cover that image completely and make another painting on top of it from one of my small studies. I do this any number of times on the same canvas, stripping large sections of each layer off as I go. I end up with something I don't understand. A discovery is made. A chimerical presence. I didn't invent anything really new, but I created the conditions for something that feels necessary to emerge. This is one way word and image can act on each other.

When I'm lucky I feel as if I've seen something I've always known was there but couldn't picture or name. And then it's the canvas and me who are acting on each other in our private language, forming and reforming each other.



Manifesto



You were born in Mountain Home, Idaho and spent your formative years living between rural Illinois and Arizona. Tell me more about these areas and your “middle American upbringing”. As somebody who emerges from a zone that has been traditionally identified through the broad threefold characteristic of “white, middle class and Protestant”, how do you relate to the supposedly more progressive, open and cosmopolitan “coasts” East and West? (Of course, this is only one way of categorising the two regions. The interior might have its positives). I am interested in both the centre and the borders of America as I have family all over...

My grandma still lives in Mountain Home. My dad was in the Air Force at the time so I was born on the base.

I’m thinking carefully about how to answer this because it’s really complicated, and, in the political environment we presently find ourselves in, it’s too easy to be misunderstood. I can grow frustrated and annoyed at how each turns the other into simplistic cartoons. The truth about these places and about the country as a whole is that they/we are steeped in contradiction and paradox and certainly in hypocrisy.

I want to say that I struggle to feel that I belong anywhere. For me, the Left/Right dichotomy has outlived its usefulness in terms of describing meaningful differences between people. It can probably hint at what they were surrounded by growing up, but it can’t tell you anything about their character or intentions or motivations or intelligence or capacity to love. I might identify more with the Left personally, but it doesn’t mean I put my faith in it. I put my faith in those who are more interested in understanding difference than in shaming it, and I might find them anywhere at anytime. Anyone serious about understanding anyone else will find themselves with someone serious about being understood and soon, someone serious about listening too.

All ideology fails. And these days, of course, capitalism subsumes it all, so most messaging with any reach only occurs in the shallow format of the spectacle. The message is simplified and flattened into a lie and probably reinforces the narcissism of whomever it’s intended to reach. Anyone who is looking to the spectacle for an authentic representation of who is living here is looking in the wrong place. One has to get on the road and figure it out for oneself. You begin to understand what’s at stake for people in various parts of the country. Some of the biggest problems are those they don’t even know they have, their particular realities so vacuous of a deeper sense of connection and purpose.

Here in this small New Mexico town, I more often feel at home than anywhere else I’ve lived. It’s not like Illinois or Idaho or California, but none of those places are like each other either. The landscape itself is what I look to for a sense of the truth and certainly for the wonder that’s necessary to keep me happy and imaginative. Sometimes the most meaningful part of a day is feeding a horse a carrot.



I Dreamt I Saw You

The 19-century exploration of North America is a big element of your art. Are there any childhood/adolescent experiences and observations that made you particularly curious about the topic?

Well, yes, I suppose that's true. It's more accurate to say that I've been as interested in Manifest Destiny and westward expansion as anything else in which I found an opportunity for metaphor and richness of imagery. It's

less for the sake of itself and more for its potential to be imbricated within an overall feeling I'm going for. For example, I made an installation last year inspired, in part, by a story of an overland expedition that went wrong on the Snake River when the explorers lost their canoes and were freezing and drowning and so on. It was part of an expedition financed by John Jacob Astor and then-former president Thomas Jefferson to found a sister republic the United States at the mouth of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest.

The disaster occurred on the Snake River in present-day Idaho, which is where members of my family lived. I made a canoe out of horsehide, which is what they did when trying to ferry food across the rapids, though usually in vain. Anyway, all of the ideology behind these expeditions had to do with empire building and notions of White Man's Burden to civilise the west and so on. Obviously this is what they would use to justify genocide and Indian removal and everything else. The white men who ran the government felt was their right and duty to do. My family has been on the continent from the start of the American project and migrated west and lived in these places, so it's a part of my inheritance. As such, I have to deal with a history I can't escape. But I don't claim to be any kind of expert on the matter.



Lethe

I'm also not an expert in Greek mythology, but when I became aware of the potential for metaphor and poetry in the mythological river of Lethe, the river of forgetting or oblivion, I found an opportunity for another layer in the project I was working on. Collective memory, or its all-too-convenient lack thereof, is of interest to me. So I

sort of conflated the Snake River with the Lethe. It's not really that any of these things are at the root of what I'm doing in terms of process and meaning, they're just things I'm aware of that can sometimes get me to where I'm going.

As of last year, I've moved on. I think I'm always chasing this strange sense of nostalgia and familiarity I can't quite put a finger on. It sort of attracts me and scares me at once. If I have a belief I think it's this: That our lives are intrinsically linked in something like an echo chamber so that my life could be connected, let's say, on a particle level, to an overland explorer or to a 12th-century German mystic or to a frog on a tiny island I've never heard of which hasn't been born yet. I'm just a little squeak in the chorus of a billowing echo cloud. So when I start to develop a hunch about something, I tend to be rewarded in terms of what I discover or read or make in response. I try to make myself available to the cosmic sound bounce, or what I perceive as one anyway.

You've said that the terrain of America is haunted by its religious fervour and you're a product of it. "Mysticism", "prophecy", "evangelism" are important subjects for you, which I found interesting. I personally have a rather strange relationship with religion. I hail from a background that is part-Catholic, part-Anglican and on a practical level, I do derive my entire existential framework, my (pretty strict) moral compass and aesthetic sense from these two systems but at this stage of life, I am not too ritualistic (I might want to become so in future when/if I get married and have children; I can't envision a family life outside that discipline).

Currently, religion is mostly a matter of intellect and conduct and not so much "participation" to me. But even though I am not very ritualistic I do understand the importance of ritual, and how it can be a portal to something higher and greater. I feel human beings have an intense and immense appetite for a taste of transcendence. In the supposedly secular quarters of the post-modern world this impulse is made manifest through all sorts of quasi-ceremonies—from wild, Dionysian raves to spectatorship of sporting events. If we lose one belief system, we will immediately try to "re-enchant" ourselves through alternative proposals. I am quite curious to know your views on religion and how you incorporate them in your art and whether what I said, in any way, connects with your perspective...

Everything you said connects with my perspective!

Religion was something I responded to directly in my earliest work and still is somehow at the center of everything I do. From those early works until now, however, my views have gone through quite an evolution and continue to. In my early work I believed I was reacting against the Evangelical Christianity of my past. It existed primarily as criticism and catharsis. I never knew so little about religion as when I belonged to one, so when I left



the church I couldn't possibly see the religious narrative framework of what I was building. I was like Hazel Motes in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*. I wanted to create the Holy Church of Christ without Christ.

I now see art itself as a deeply religious idea even if its ideals are sublimated in the so-called secular postmodern world you're talking about. We overlook the obvious: that art as a category only exists because we say it does. It exists as a social reality held together by our shared faith in it. Our faith makes it real to us. Someone who doesn't share our faith can easily say there is no art, just pigment on canvas, and that would be true. As for those of us who come together in faith, without necessarily being able to articulate our needs, we look to art for clues, for passages and doorways, as a mirror through which we conceptualise what and who it is we think we are. Look at all the identity work that's so popular now. The artists are all referencing mythology not only to tie their deepest sense of identity to a sacred origin, but to make that origin real in the construction of a sacred history through the artwork that will outlive them.

In the way that my generation can celebrate something ironic sincerely, we can perpetuate our religious postures and attitudes secularly. We can look to a field like neuroscience to answer questions about the brain, but it isn't enough to give purpose to what we feel. We are lost without some sense of identity rooted to something that feels larger than us. You can't define religion, you can only define its parts, and its parts are everywhere. Especially, they are inside of us. The faith, dogma, transcendent aspirations as you mentioned, the need for connection, for fellowship, group identity, forgiveness, connection, detachment, surrender, epiphany. The stuff that religion is made of is for a reason.



Trinity

To finally understand that my root motivation is to be recognized by an Other, and that it's as if we form each other out of this recognition, is itself totally religious thinking. If I look back at those early paintings, what I see now is not that I was making the anti-Christian work I hoped I was, it was that I was searching for my own worthiness through making them, and what could be a more Christian instinct than that? Who or what did I hope was going to make me worthy? The Art World? I didn't know. I hadn't had enough life experience to see that far into the distance, to see the art world as just another corruptible church, as artificial as anything else I had ever believed in. All of my instincts were tied to religious thought, but none of my intentions were.

I had an early instinct to make an image and then destroy it, but no understanding of what that meant, and therefore no means of transforming that instinct into real intention. It was as if the Byzantine Controversies were taking place in my own body. I was tricking myself into thinking that I was making these paintings as if from the outside, looking into the heart of a monster, when in fact, that sense of violence in the picture was coming from me, not the church. That isn't to say that the institutions and individuals in the picture weren't a part of something deeply troubling in our culture—they were, they are—it's just that the figures in the picture existed only within the limits of my imagination. They weren't real. "This is not a pipe," this is a scapegoat, a wanted poster for someone you'll never find.



Last summer I had the incredible privilege of hearing the poet Allison Benis White read from her book *Please Bury Me in This* after I had read it at home. She read at the Brand Library in Los Angeles where I had a solo show up at the time. The book is comprised of one poem in many parts. Not only is it a poem, it is sort of a letter to those close to her who committed suicide. There is a line from it, "Whatever God is, something gentle inside something ruined in the mind." This is the kind of truthfulness that matters to me in art, the kind of surprise that comes from putting, in this case, words, in just such an order, and it unlocks you somehow and you are confronted and you absolutely know that you are meant to be alert right now, you are meant to hear this with the "ears behind your ears."

My work almost never generated the conversations I hoped it would and it took a long time to accept responsibility for that. In fact, I think I'm only now beginning to. Allison's reading made me think about art as a secret letter. I began "writing" to those I imagined living in shame whether or not they were guilty of anything. I thought of how, in our mob morality, we create scapegoats and marginalise whomever doesn't fit into the image we have of how we think the world ought to be.

Recently, I've made some paintings which haven't come from outside reference material. There is a triangle relationship between the ghosts of those I was close to and who have died before me, dreams and sightings of various animals and my own poems. As the imagery is layered in a painting, there is no one secret letter to any one person, but I imagine its parts slipping into their world. I recognise this for what it is: prayer. And so I return to prayer. Or is it the first time?

It is astounding to think of this and to think of my first angry paintings. I do have a sense of calling. I have vague images in my mind of what the work will be, of what I'm working towards. But just as I have to destroy an image several times in a painting before I can excavate what I'm looking for, I can't just make it happen all at once. But I feel it approaching.



The Call and the Called Out

You've been creating some work inspired by the German artist Max Beckmann (1884-1950)—eg, "The Call and the Called Out (The Dogs Grow Larger)"—who is making you think a lot about violence, in particular "violence of the mind". You find his art somehow relevant to the current era of #MeToo, Trumpism and uber-capitalism. You write that in today's world "no message can be sent or received outside the sphere of the spectacle" (you mentioned that above in the second question as well), you "feel a sense of loss—a loss of intimacy, of privacy, of a broader humanism". Tell us more about the insights that you've gained from Beckmann and how exactly you are applying them to these problems that are a matter of concern to you, and us all...

In Beckmann's time, he and his peers were outed for being degenerates. They didn't share the popular ideology. Their work was an emotional outpouring in a time of psychological repression. They were forced out and in some cases, so discredited and marginalised that they committed suicide, such as in someone like Kirchner's case.

So Beckmann's imagery is one I respond to both as an internal and external state of things parallel with the current political environment. On the one hand, in each of his paintings, there is a great deal of violence going on, and it's the female figures which appear especially to suffer. I can read this as parallel to what women (and some men) are speaking out against in our society now, and I can read the Trump regime as the authoritarian background the figures are cast into.

But I want to distinguish between Beckmann's intentions and mine, as I wouldn't try to speak for his. The idea of "violence of mind" is my own. What I mean by that is we can be violent in ways that aren't necessarily physical or even easily perceived from the outside. Something I find common now is the way in which we make wild assumptions about those we perceive as enemies because, if we're lazy, we depend on the enemies we construct to develop our own identities, and more dangerously, our group identities. We impose a narrative on top of a real person we know almost nothing about, this person who has lived a real life we intentionally ignore. Even this ignoring can be an act of violence if intentional and sustained. We might learn something about a person that ought to change our opinion of him or her, but we quietly and secretly refuse, out of fear of what it could mean about ourselves, and that, too, is a form of violence of mind.



Beckmann Study 1

What I want to say is that the enemy we project onto the outside world is one which also lives inside us, and the more we project, the more we justify our violence. This isn't to say there aren't times when our anger is justified and that harsh action is required to protect and liberate ourselves from oppressive environments, such as the one Beckmann lived in. But its when those enemies are out of reach that we begin to scapegoat those we can reach, perhaps because they share physical traits of a real enemy, perhaps simply because we know their unpopularity in our in-groups places us above scrutiny, and by attacking them we signal our indispensability to our group, our status of belonging. After all, our group could be one which might cast someone out at any given moment. This is how we become the authoritarians we claim to oppose. We imagine their nature is totally outside anything resembling our own.

All of the work I'm making now is intentionally located in paradox and acknowledges my own confusion. It stays away from any easy commentary. I find myself confused by the cacophonous spectacle going on now at all times. Layering these images and destroying them in the process brings out something chimerical, perhaps a visual representation of both the spectacle and the real suffering it leverages to grow itself. We don't live in a time of subtle language and deep reflection, but rather in a time where the more bombastic one's reaction the

more proof of moral conviction. Whose job is it to measure the collateral damage done in the process? Where will those who didn't fit in the narrative templates belong when we tell this story a hundred years from now?



Beckmann Study 3

As we are discussing religion and violence, I think I should bring in René Girard—as we are both fans of his. I wrote on Instagram that I discovered him years ago via the American priest Robert Barron and was blown away. Of late, I have gone back to Girard after reading loads of Robert Greene—one of my absolute favourite contemporary thinkers who has written very candidly about Power, War, Seduction, Mastery and Human Nature (while withstanding criticisms that he's promoting amoral and Machiavellian behaviour).

Somehow Greene's exposé and treatment of the dark, animal side of human beings has been making me think a lot about Girard's ideas of mimetic desire, rivalry, the scapegoat mechanism and sacrifice. I love his very original way of looking at the Bible—a document that is so foundational in world culture and yet so confusing and difficult to interpret. So yeah, how have Girard's theories informed your thinking? You said that they've been quite an influence...

You could probably detect Girard's influence in my thinking when I brought up scapegoating earlier. He's become really important to me, so now I'm very eager to read Robert Greene! Thanks for the tip!

Well, I really like mimetic theory as a functioning explanation for the origins of human violence. It's caused me to examine my own impulses and reasons for why I do what I do and that's helped me to grow. Understanding mimetic desire and rivalry, one sees it everywhere in culture. One sees it among one's peers and colleagues. Scapegoating is constant.

I don't know how to demonstrate the manner in which any individual writer/thinker influences my work; I only know that I do integrate what I read into how I think and how I think into how I work. In the most general way, I think Girard must contribute to my reluctance to make simple political commentary and eschew any good guys vs. bad guys narrative that I might try to depict in a painting.

I think rather than holding tight to any particular intellectual, I make connections between bits of things I read and things I've seen and so on. A string of associations. Girard's mimetic theory could be read into "Wise Blood," which I mentioned before, and Flannery O'Connor and the Southern gothics relate back to German Expressionism, this rich murkiness, of trying to see a face through a screen, which connects to Jewish philosophers like Levinas and his "denuded face." Levinas connects with the Matrixial Borderspace that Bracha Ettinger writes about. And somehow there is mysticism here. There are artists who see it. Anselm Kiefer for example. My partner Maja Ruznic who is the real Ettinger scholar around here.

You posted that quote by Kafka recently, one of my all-time favorite quotes by any writer (although I'm going to quote my favorite translation): "It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet."

This is what all the juice is for, what it does when everything you read is integrated into what you experience, and the border between your life and your work evaporates. A world starts to make itself known and the work is to reveal it. Girard certainly did that.

Your paintings are extremely visceral and psychologically charged—which I love! They are an excavation of time. Everything is distorted. Your semi-realistic figures are rendered abstract. "I want the paintings to have the feeling of vague recollection, a memory that starts to form but disappears," you say. I have been thinking a lot about "memory"—the whole phenomenon of it—how it is formed and preserved, what does it consist of, what effects does it have, and also how it could be overcome. And I've been reading different perspectives. Tell us more about what you think of time and memory.



I love talking about time and memory. Going back to Lethe in mythology, it's interesting to me that the word is the opposite of "Aletheia." Aletheia is an archaic Greek word for a particular kind of truth. The idea was that truth/aletheia was something which only poets had access to, and it was through sung speech that they had the power to stir the memory and that through this restored memory, one could retrieve the truth. This is because, "lethe" the spirit of forgetfulness flows through that particular river in the Underworld, and when you drink from it, you forget your past life before being reborn. Aletheia is like a gate opening to return one's memory. Or more to the point, it's to restore one to one's true identity, and in that identity we're realigned with our purpose. This is what gives us the potential to live authentically in the world. I find it beautiful that it's through poetry that we find ourselves...back to the word and image question...



Subway Study 1

You've been working on a piece on Michael Jackson that lies between a recognition of the colossal talent that he was and an awareness of the accusations of paedophilia brought against him. In general, you want to operate within a space that can generate nuanced conversations. The polarity of political rhetoric is something that really bothers you. It annoys me a lot, as well.



I can literally feel the dance of the dichotomies whenever I pick up any major newspaper from the Anglosphere: order/flux, autonomy of enterprise/encouragement of social justice, a very rigid heteronormativity/a mad sort of gender fluidity, emphasis on human ingenuity/concerns over climate change, an (impractical) focus on the local/an (uncritical) openness to immigration, a denial of the atrocities of colonialism/a denial of all that's valuable about Western Civ. Anyway, what made you pick MJ?

I had the idea after watching the documentary "Leaving Neverland" in which two men Wade Robson and James Safechuck came out about how Michael Jackson sexually abused them as kids. I encourage anyone to watch it, but I do feel settled on the matter, that Jackson abused kids throughout his life and career. So in that regard, there's no ambiguity for me. Watching the documentary, I related strongly to Robson and Safechuck, in Robson's case because he grew up idol-ising him and imitating his dances. There's also the fact that we're all around the same age now. And finally, parallel to the way in which that part of Jackson's and their lives were occurring in secret—that a secret like that can destroy a family—is something that runs parallel to my own family life at that time. So my response was quite emotional and deeply sympathetic with the two men and with the families that had sued Michael Jackson while he was still alive.



My God

In spite of the awful things Michael Jackson did, his music, legacy, and talent is a cultural gain, and since I never knew him in life, it's a waste of my time to hate him or to try to prove my superiority by never listening to his music. To do so would probably be a projection of my own pain in an unconscious and misguided attempt to find a community to share it with. Joining, say, an online community to shout insults at Michael Jackson supporters is not some kind of enlightened position or helpful in serving justice or proving moral superiority, and it especially wouldn't bring about any authentic connection or intimacy with others who were doing the same. In the end, the shouting match is completely outside the interests of the victims.

Going back to the painting, "My God," I wanted to make something that lives in the ambiguity and paradox. I mean, to some degree, I want all my work to exist in paradox. The image that the painting responds to is a still frame from a performance in which he stood over a wind machine with his arms outstretched while it blew his shirt and hair in dramatic fashion. He did that often. Removing details from the stage and background and so on

brought out the crucifixion-like pose. In life, he had always presented himself as a scapegoat, like Christ, and I think in many ways saw himself that way. He embodied the same kind of contradiction as, say, the Catholic Church, and certainly one can't help but think of the many scandals involving priests.

Going back to the polarity of rhetoric—I think the fact that public discourse has broken down drastically and that people have been rendered incapable of identifying/making subtle distinctions in arguments have everything to do with the very structure of the modern political spectrum itself (a legacy of the French Revolution). It's like the skeletal framework of Right and Left itself is flawed (I read somewhere that it is the epitome of the 'Cartesian' character of the French intellectual tradition, wherein everything—not only politics—is pulled to the extremes, is cast in binary terms, for the sheer thrill of theatre) and the stuff that is built upon it is bound to create friction.

The world now is too inextricably caught within the Left/Right typology and people don't even know how and where did it originate. So yeah, how do you think artists could and should respond to the problem? You're already taking a step in that direction. What more could be done?

Indeed, I find the dynamic of polarity everywhere now. It's why I left Facebook, for example. People I used to admire and respect become totally insane, whether on the so-called Left or Right, and pretty regularly they seemed to me to become the very thing they were busy shaming others about.

So with regard to your question about what I think artists should do about the problem of polarization, I would say simply to think deeply about what one is doing in one's work and the root reasons for it. I don't think there are any topics that shouldn't be raised, but I don't think art which is merely topical is very good. If anything, make what you think consensus would hate. We actually avoid being part of the problem that way.

The work we make will shift in meaning as culture changes, and in ways we absolutely cannot predict now. It doesn't mean that one shouldn't be a political activist in one's life when called to be, it just means that doing politics through a painting, for example, is not the best way to do it. It's valuable any time someone slows down to look at art and for their assumptions to be destabilized. It will, in some small way, do their consciousness good. Good work will elicit a soulful response and one can place trust in a person who engages with the world that way, whether or not we all agree.

I read that your 2011 video piece *The Evangelists* contains a 3D representation of a neighbour with a mental illness who tragically burned down your apartment and studio. He wasn't in a position to assess or recognise the gravity of his act, which you knew very well. You decided to invite him to collaborate for something constructive, three years later. You didn't want it all to be for nothing. What really jumped out to me was that your decision was "a prevention of entropy." "Entropy" is a concept that I think about now and then and would use the word a lot with a professor of mine while discussing worldviews. I'd like to know more about what exactly you understand by entropy—personal, social, cultural, cosmic? How may it be circumvented or resisted?

I don't think I meant anything very unique or special by it. I probably just used the word because, in our case, there was an actual fire, so a lot of heat/energy being released. We lost our home and it took some time for life to get back to normal. The idea itself felt like some sort of conversion of energy, rather than waste.

I was really proud of what we accomplished with "The Evangelists," and I say "we" because it was such an undertaking I couldn't have possibly done it on my own. I put everything I had into it. I was struggling with depression especially in those years and that everything went mostly ignored made it difficult to feel good about life in general. I got divorced at the end of that year and lost my galleries. I think one could call that entropy.

Because you asked me the question, I went back and watched parts of it. My dad is in the animation as well, and is presently going through chemo for pancreatic cancer, which, ultimately, isn't curable. So I'm looking at the animation as sort of a time capsule. That really haunts me I have to say. Wow...I'm realising this as I type.

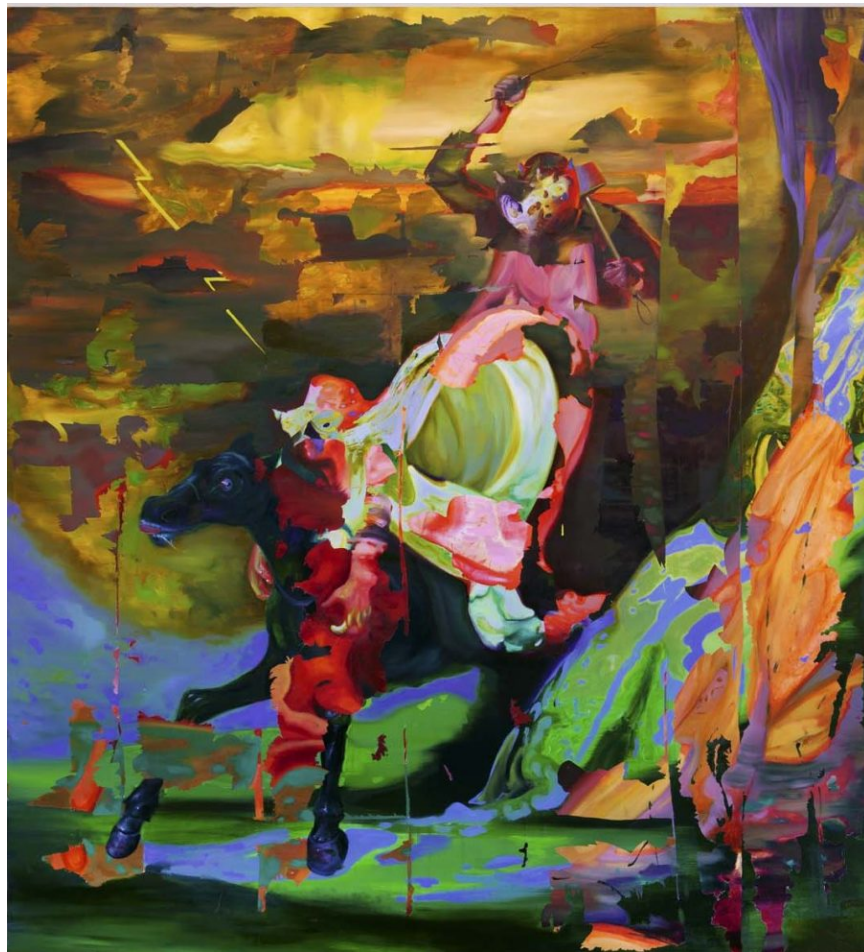


A Horse is a Boat a Man is a Chair and the Ocean is a Room into which Every River Empties

You fail and you fail and you fail and it's not because the work was bad; it's because it isn't essential to the narrative that a culture is contriving about itself at the time that it comes into existence. What happens to that work? To the artist? Does there ever come a time when it's seen again? Seen differently?

I don't know if entropy is a good word for that sense of waste and disappointment but it poisons you over time if you aren't careful with what you decide to value. Perhaps in trying to prevent entropy, one only spreads it.

New Mexico, where I live, is one of the poorest states in the country. Rural poverty is quite a different thing from urban poverty. I'm not saying it's good for anyone, but there is a certain presence to it. If that's entropy, I have to say that the way in which it makes time present in such a quiet and powerful way is feeding what I do.



The Devil in Tom Walker

Your fiancée Maja Ruznic is a painter as well, and she is from Bosnia. When and how did the two of you meet? How has the event of having a partner who is a fellow artist impacted your creativity?

Maja and I met briefly for the first time at some point while I was still married. I'm thinking it must have been the summer of 2012, at a show where she had some work. I had been aware of her work for a couple years before that. I saw some paintings of hers at the CCA grad show in San Francisco in 2009 but didn't have any idea who she was. Much later, after the divorce, I invited her for an interview as part of a project I was working on. Yes, it was like you're thinking; I was a sly little bastard! The interview, by the way, was in a jail cell, in the basement of a gallery where I was doing a residency, which used to be an S&M dungeon. I still can't believe I had the nerve to invite her there. I don't remember when we started dating exactly but not long after that.

cris worley
FINE ARTS



I don't know if I've ever described the creative power of the relationship very well, I think because the whole relationship is about creativity really. There's really no separation between our creative lives and life itself. So we're constantly affecting each other. One doesn't even need to be in the room; we know how the other thinks! I should say that before we got together, I was a huge fan of her work. That was a major part of the attraction for me. So, to this day, I really admire how she thinks and works and there's frankly just no living painter I like better. Not too many dead ones either! We can't finish a painting without getting the other's input. We share each other's values art-wise, what it is we think art should do, what's important in painting, why we read what we read, etc. I think it's having each other that makes us feel less crazy or alone, like, I'm not the only one who would have these values and feelings about what art is and what it should do. I trust her eye and her spirit absolutely. I've grown so much as a result.

A short one: what ideas/concepts/subjects would you like to explore in future exhibitions?

It's a secret.

- TULIKA BAHADUR AND JOSHUA HAGLER