

“This Nightmarish Burger Art Is a Perfect Metaphor for America”
Julia Gray / April 13, 2018



Trump Rally, 2017, 43 x 55 inches, acrylic on paper

The world started to gnarl and unravel for artist Aaron Johnson when George W. Bush was president. The political and social chaos surrounding 9/11 and the War in Iraq inspired the Brooklyn-based artist to use his cartoonish paintings and sculptures to expose humanity at its most raw and depraved.

His bright hallucinations of sex, violence, and hamburgers melt into American iconography. Sharp-toothed monsters and mutated cowboys eat pancakes and human flesh. But beyond the grotesque spectacle, Johnson excavates an innate tenderness—it manifests as a warm embrace between monsters, or a panicked look in a man-eater’s eye.

After years of depicting this distorted reality in painstaking acrylic paintings, Johnson started experimenting with looser forms, like sculptures made out of old socks. The new textures offer him the freedom to dig deeper into his psyche, revealing subconscious patterns of intimacy and aggression. From now through May 5, Johnson has a solo show, *Turkey Pistol Dinner*, at Galerie Sebastien Adrien in Paris. And from June 7 till July 6, he’ll have a solo show at Joshua Liner Gallery in NYC.

VICE caught up with Johnson to talk about Trump and sock hoarding, and to get a tour through his vibrant dystopia.



L: *Cheesy and Saucy*, 2017, acrylic and socks. R: *Sweetheart Burger*, 2017, 5x6x5 inches, acrylic and socks

VICE: There's something really disturbing yet playful about your work. Is this tension something you want the viewer to feel?

Aaron Johnson: I've always been interested in the grotesque and how humor and horror can butt up against each other, how repulsion and beauty can work together, or eroticism and death. Like a monstrous couple sharing a tender moment. There has to be a balance.

You almost have to feel sympathetic toward the monsters. How would you describe them and the world they live in?

It's a painted world that mirrors this world, as filtered through me and the paint. This is a world that remembers we're animals, just bodies for a spiritual self to exist in for a while. We're biological creatures that are eating and digesting things, and there are things out there that probably want to eat and digest us, so there are a lot of mouths in the paintings.

I don't totally understand the creatures or know how to describe them, so that's why I keep on making them. They can feel very real to me. The painting process manifests them. My role seems to be trying to open a portal for them to show up. You see cycles of life and death, sex and death, generation and destruction.



Gone Fishin', 2017, 72 x 108 inches, acrylic and socks on canvas over panel

You also manage to comment on more surface level societal ills, like what's going politically.

I think of my scenes and characters as not being specifically narrative, but more as ghosts, haunted spirits with a certain kind of American subconscious. That's something I'm thinking about now in the Trump era: What do you do when the world feels so vile and evil? I feel like we're still surrounded by so much love and light, and it's a matter of trying to find it. There's that kind of duality in these paintings.

Each year I make a few pieces in the "grotesque Americana" category. My paintings in 2008 were all painted on American flags. It was George W. Bush's last year in office, so I had been making a lot of work up to that year with cowboys, thinking about the toxic masculinity of the American male. There were bomber jets made out of dicks dropping burgers. I was thinking about the Iraq war, our response to 9/11, globalism, and the spread of American trash culture.

Your visual language—cowboys, teeth, fast food—has remained fairly consistent.

My language speaks to the animalistic aspect of humanity. Our teeth can be pretty violent if you think about the things that we eat. Pizza and burgers can be a good representation of American crap culture, especially thinking about the brutality of slaughterhouses. Violence underlies so much of our contemporary world. It's all sort of tucked under this veil of consumerism. The burgers I make maybe don't look so benign, a little bit more expressive of the violence behind them.

How do you think your practice developed after Trump was elected?

I needed some escapism, which spawned *Gone Fishin'*. I grew up in Minnesota, so the idea of going fishing is like checking out from reality. I thought it'd be interesting to take some innocuous topics—going fishing, driving a pickup truck down a country road, or hanging out in the hot tub—and make these relaxing escapist scenes monstrous and corrupt. The idea is that there is no such thing as escape.



Solo show: *Gone Fishin'*, Joshua Liner Gallery, NYC, April 2017

That notion of "no escape" is also made clear by your eventual decision to make paintings about Trump.

Nobody really believed that Trump would win, but I had this feeling that if he did I could already see the horrible Trump monster paintings that I would make. I imagined this vortex of teeth in his face and his belly, poised to just inhale and devour the whole universe.

When he won, the idea of making that work felt so consuming. When I made *Trump Rally*, I found myself focusing a lot on the crowd which led me to paint all sorts of brutal shit— American flags and monster faces, an atom bomb blowing up a skull, Cheetos being vomited, a black guy getting beat up by a white guy. And Trump is just up there naked, and with the tiniest penis.

Do you think it's important to navigate the grotesque with a sense of humor?

Yeah, for sure. I like to make a really generous and rich viewing experience, paintings that give a lot to the viewer. Like with my sock paintings I want to evoke the feeling of absurdity, the unexpected quality and a sense of humor in making these forms out of socks.

I would start out by just dunking socks in glue and water and throwing them onto the canvas and pouring paint onto it. It just seems so stupid and amusing, socks as this irreverent material to put into the sacred area of painting.

Kind of like outsider art.

I think it's interesting that work considered traditionally "outsider" art is readily accepted on the "inside" now. I like that. What I don't like when work is so "insider" that it only makes sense to a really small audience. I like to make work that anyone who could appreciate a good film or novel or song can understand, without needing a background in art theory.

Would you call these works paintings?

I feel like they're within the realm of painting. But I like how—in terms of the context and history of painting—sticking a sock on a canvas can violate the purity of what painting is supposed to be. It's also interesting how these socks can mimic a ready-made brushstroke. I played with the idea of the thick impasto brush stroke, so it's sort of like a joke about that as well as an homage to that.

Kind of like outsider art.

I think it's interesting that work considered traditionally "outsider" art is readily accepted on the "inside" now. I like that. What I don't like when work is so "insider" that it only makes sense to a really small audience. I like to make work that anyone who could appreciate a good film or novel or song can understand, without needing a background in art theory.

There's so much going on in your sock portraits in terms of merging humor with horror and figurative with abstraction.

A good example of that dichotomy might be the man whose face is made up of sock guns and the woman made of tacos. It seemed funny to me that a face could be made out of tacos, and that those tacos could be made out of socks. A taco shell could be a flap of skin and the taco meat could be flesh or guts. I've always been amused by that Garbage Pail Kids kind of gross-out stuff.

With *Son of a Gun*, I liked the idea of taking the killing machine and deconstructing and reconstructing it out of something flaccid and impotent and harmless. I thought it was interesting to pair this juvenile content with a focused craft to get these glossy, almost beautiful paint finishes, and then to put them in a context where your first reaction is that they're far from beautiful.

Where did you get all these socks?

Well I quickly realized that I needed a lot more than just my old socks, so I started posting on Facebook to have people send me their old socks. People didn't know what I was doing with them, so it was kind of a fun thing. When people would send me their socks I'd send back a little sharpie drawing.

That exchange and that process made the work less of a solitary endeavor. I liked that interactivity and collaboration. And I like to think that maybe the socks maintain little bits of the consciousness of the people who donated them. Then, these things become sort of like collective consciousness transmitters.

You use a lot of different mediums and processes. Does each method correlate with a specific intention?

I've recently been exploring this blotting technique, which is just a matter of slopping paint onto the paper and then blotting it, doing that over and over again and looking for body parts and forms in the paint blots, then carving those out and allowing the narrative to unfold with the process.

There's no real intention. In *Pancake Rally*, I didn't plan to include Trump but he just showed up in the blotted forms. I was reluctant to make another Trump image but that resistance sort of made it that much stronger. Relinquishing control to a painterly mess allows subconscious or unexpected stuff to enter the narrative, and gives way to more abstract passages.

Max Ernst worked with a similar technique and used it to mine the subconscious. There's a lot of welcoming spontaneity into the works. I think each different process I've been involved in has an aspect of that. I think I'm finally OK with the idea that my practice can have all these different channels and that it can all be a part of one body of work.