

Aaron Johnson's New Works Move From Foot To Canvas



Aaron Johnson is a master of the grotesque, with paintings that gleefully eviscerate the American dream (along with 21st century militarism, religion, and any other sacred cows you can think of.) My curiosity was piqued when Johnson told me that his practice had taken something of a turn recently: he'd been soliciting donations of socks from friends and acquaintances, and then using them to make paintings. (Each sock-donor received an original drawing in return.) An exhibition of the sock-based works goes on view today at Gallery Poulson in Copenhagen through November 16. I spoke with the artist about his uncommon new medium and the "metaphysical residue" of socks that are not your own.

Where did the impulse to use socks as a material come from? Were you at an impasse regarding your traditional working methods, and simply looking for something to push you forward?

Yep! I was bored with my standard process of reverse-painted polymer-peel paintings. The idea of using a sock was in a list of "other ways to make paintings" in one of my sketchbooks from several years ago. It was a goofy absurd irreverent impulse to stick a sock on a painting. From there it got serious; I became engaged in the painterly implications of the sock, and the paintings proliferated.

Did you notice any aesthetic themes among the socks that were sent to? Did different types of socks prove to have specific useful advantages, in terms of constructing a painting?

I got all types of socks. Christmas socks, and socks with cats on them, came in surprisingly high quantities. I have learned various uses for various types: stripes/patterns/argyles are good for ready-made patterns and detail. Thick wooly hiker socks are my favorite, because they're so chunky and textural and bulbous. Baby socks are good for teeth. Long socks and knee-highs are great for lyrical gestures. Ankle socks eluded me for a while, until I realized that the opening props up nicely to make an orifice into the painting surface. Some personal favorite socks that came in were skull and crossbones socks (which became pirate hats), a sock with cows and dollar signs on it that said "we need a cash cow!", and a Danish sock that said "Øl Smager," which means "beer taster". The weirdest sock donation: one person drew pictures and wrote things such as "Cindy Lauper touched my area" on his socks.

Did you wash the socks before working with them, or do these paintings actually carry with them the residual fug and residue of the sock-donators?

I did not wash them. They mostly came clean, but no matter how clean, a giant pile of socks still smells a little funky. The studio has an odor of feet mixed with fabric softener mixed with paint. I did get a couple of socks from a guy who works on a farm that came heavily dirt encrusted, and one was shredded as if it has been caught in a tractor. Physical funk aside, I'm interested in the metaphysical residue—that each sock may contain a particle of the consciousness of the sock donor—and that brings a sense of collective consciousness into the paintings.

You traded drawings for socks to prepare for making these works. What sort of drawings were they?



The drawings took 5 minutes, or sometimes 30 seconds: Sharpie on 6x11 inch legal pad paper. I make them at the breakfast table or late at night. They are stream of consciousness doodle-y things that tend to be little monsters engaged in demented little fornications. Over a hundred of these drawings have gone out in the mail in exchange for socks.

What ended up being the most difficult part of using socks to make art, in a technical sense?

The socks make painting difficult. That's part of the appeal. They are an interference; they get in the way of the paintbrush. I think of the socks as a ready-made impasto, readymade brush strokes. Unlike a regular brush stroke, however, they can't just be painted over to edit them out, the sock will still be there as a sock no matter what. Extra chunky pentimenti. The socks forced me to be looser, less fussy, less detailed, and more of a clunky expressionistic painter.

How about promoting these paintings with a limited edition line of AaronJohnsonsocks? I'd

love a pair that came embroidered with the image from Hummer.

Brilliant idea! If anyone out there reading this can help get that together, please let me know.