

HYPERALLERGIC

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The Horror Of Socks

by Samuel Jablon
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I met Aaron Johnson on Facebook. A couple months ago I saw his call for socks in my newsfeed, and I was curious why he wanted them. I messaged him and we started talking, and then arranged for me to drop off a large bag of particularly destroyed socks. When I delivered them, I saw the work. It was the last thing I expected. The images were gross, haunting, and beautiful.

I thought that Aaron had lost his mind. I wanted to interview him on how he had dumped his previous studio process to embrace old, mismatched, dirty socks.

Samuel Jablon: We met through Facebook, where you put a call out for socks in exchange for a drawing. Could you talk about this process?

Aaron Johnson: A driving force of this new series has been the exchange: people send me a batch of old/mateless/holey socks, and in return I send each sock donor a drawing. The list of sock donors is over 100 now, so 100 drawings have gone out in exchange, and a couple thousand socks have come into my studio. The exchange brought an element of community into the work, made the walls of the studio porous, the painting process less solitary and more expansive. In a very real way, these works could not have been made without the contributions of other people, and metaphysically, it brought a sense of collective consciousness into the work.

SJ: How did you start working with socks?

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AJ: In a sketchbook several years ago, in a list of ideas for other ways to make paintings, I wrote “stick socks on canvas.” The idea stayed in the back of my mind for years before I finally got to a rupture point in my studio practice, and then I stuck a sock on a canvas.

SJ: Why socks?

AJ: First, it was an absurd gesture — a goofy, irreverent attitude toward painting and toward my own practice. Deeper layers of meaning piled up, though, as the paintings proliferated. Formally, the sock is a ready-made brush stroke, sock impasto, a painterly device. The spongy/gnarly/hole-torn surface built up with socks makes interesting painterly implications. These paintings can have a vitality like squirming flesh, surfaces punctuated with orifices, bulges, and a swirling seductive physicality. The humility of the sock is important, a poor material in the Arte Povera sense, a banal and accessible materiality. On top of that, the sock is a shed skin of the individual. The sock is a grotesque Freudian object with an open end and a phallic end, an artifact of the steps walked in a person’s life. I like to imagine each sock as a talisman, a magical object containing a drop of the psyche of the sock donor. So a piling up of socks in a painting is a piling up of fragments of consciousness.



SJ: I laughed when I saw the call for socks on Facebook. I had a whole bag of disgusting socks I was about to dump out. I know you and I started talking through this process — what were the other kinds of conversations that came out of this? Were most people happy to unload their socks on you?

AJ: Well, you were the only one to bring me socks scavenged from a collapsed building, particularly gnarly! I was certainly trying to make a comedy out of the oversaturated self-promotional ridiculous

forum that is Facebook, by posting pictures of myself all dressed in socks and asking people to send me their old socks. I also enjoyed posting into the ether of Facebook and in turn engaging in a real, physical exchange with people, something I drew with my hands mail-exchanged for the old socks off your sweaty feet. Yes, a lot of people were happy to participate, as well as being generally curious about what I’m doing with these socks and maybe thinking I’ve lost my mind.

SJ: What do you mean by “rupture point” in your studio practice?

AJ: I had been working in a very particular process and style for years, something I had built

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up over a decade: reverse-painted polymer peel paintings with intricate details and super slick surfaces. The rupture was a need to shift into a radically different way of working, opening up my painting practice into unknown territory.

SJ: How do the socks take you somewhere new?

AJ: Tactility. Chunky surface. A bold and direct approach to painting, particularly in opposition to my complicated prior process. Like a volcanic eruption that came after years of slow process, slow feed, slow, arduous commitment. If the tiny brushstrokes in my older paints were delicate melodic notes, these socks as brush strokes are power chords.

SJ: Has rupturing your process forced you to find new ways of working or pointed you in a new direction?

AJ: When I finished my first sock painting, I had a revelation, something like: “As I stare at this painting, it stares back at me, and as I stand here in my two socks, so does the painting hang there in its many socks.” And that seemed absolutely absurd, and therein somehow profound. That was the point of rupture. From there, the paintings proliferated naturally — the new direction, the new course, was easy to navigate.



SJ: Your previous work had a narrative: every character was either getting fucked, shot, or devoured. Is your new work in this world, or is it somewhere else?

AJ: My urge to find a new material approach to making paintings was probably more symptomatic of something buried deeper, a need to escape that realm of content, the figures raping/dismembering/eating each other. All of that was an ongoing saga in my work about George Bush America and its aftermath. The shit was getting too dark; it was bringing me down! Sticking socks on canvas was antithetical to the backwards painting approach which bore the phantasmagoria of psychotic detail. The sock is an interference. It gets in the way of any impulse I may have to get lost in fussy details, and it forces me to be ham-fisted. It brought a big liberation. This has been a tremendous shift in my work, but certain things carry over. The psychedelic comic grotesque remains. I'm still painting monsters. These paintings are about aggressive surface — more confrontational, less illustrational, less didactic. Now it's the phantasmagoria of the sock. I'm no longer making works about political horrors, but rather making works in spite of political horrors.

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SJ: The new paintings are eerie and disgusting. They don't narrate a horror, but possibly are a horror ... in a good way. What's next — more socks? Or are sweaters, underwear, hats, entering the mix?

AJ: That horror might be like looking in the face of death. At a certain point it occurred to me that the sock is like a little death; it's a shed skin, a hollow carcass; when mateless it is a lost partner, slipped into obsolescence; socks get used and worn out and replaced, a cycle; a life could be measured in the

socks spent. When a pile of these little deaths accumulates into a big, semi-abstract head that glares out at the viewer with huge eyes, there's a confrontation with a collective sense of death.

That sounds morbid, but I'm talking more optimistically, towards interconnectedness and transcendence. I've discovered that dynamic through experiencing these works as I create them, an avenue worth exploring in more depth in upcoming works. I'm interested in Tibetan Buddhist and/or shamanic and/or Yogic and/or psychedelic philosophies that delve into exploring death, ways to experience death and to know death before dying. In ways this project, this "horror," is maybe about all of that. There will be more sock paintings for the foreseeable future; right now I'm going bigger; a few 7-by-8-foot canvases are just getting started. Sweaters might get in there, to push the woolly sculptural materiality that works so well. No tighty-whities or panties ... I will leave the old underwear paintings to someone else!

SJ: Do you have a favorite type of sock to work with (wool, ankle, knee-high, toe)?

AJ: Thick, woolly hiker socks are the best. All socks are good in their own way. I turn a lot of socks inside out for texture. A plain old white tube sock has nice gnarly texture inside, and an argyle sock often has stringy, fringe-y textures on the inside of the patterned area. Synthetic spandex-type socks stretch out really long when dipped in matte medium (the adhesive I'm using), and tights and nylons are good for long gestures too. Socks with little characters/animals/designs/words on them are fun for a ready-made detail in the paintings. Baby socks make great monster teeth.

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