

Aaron Johnson's Sock Paintings Are A Grotesque Satire On Modern Life

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by Moray Mair

Aaron Johnson's sock paintings are a grotesque continuation of his playful comic farce – which you can see in a previous post I wrote on his work – in which he deconstructs and attacks our consumer ridden, fundamentalist, fanatical society.



These wonderful pop explosions take on the mantle of Robert Rauschenberg and the other Abstract Expressionists who understood that art and life need to find a common ground, a motif that can reflect and subsume contemporary life, filter it and reimagine it as a visual expletive, a mark that has resonance and the power to communicate. And what better way to do it than with socks. Those smelly, crusty, personal, throwaway foot garments that cling to us throughout our lives.

The paintings began life online with Johnson running a social media campaign looking for socks in exchange for drawings. Before long he was falling over piles of unwanted socks in his studio. All sorts from everywhere. Here's how he put it in a recent interview with blackbookmag.com:

"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."

Joshua Liner Gallery

Absurd, yes. Odd, most certainly. Yet beneath the material fun of the pictures lies a serious physicality. Socks are durable things, have their own dynamic, create their own boundaries, rules and limitations and forced Johnson to re-adjust his process. The socks protested against his brush, soaked up paint, created bulges, undulations, orifices. And through that play, that fight for every inch of canvas came these wonderful paintings, alive, off the surface, inviting us in, to look on, look through. Here's what he said about the work to hyperallergic.com:

“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.”

This is painting as ready made, the squirming, moving socks of Johnson's paintings a new departure for an artist who has spent his life creating absurdist psychedelic pictures of an America gone mad.



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