



OtherPeoplesPixels: Your paintings are primarily acrylic on material such as knit mesh and construction debris netting. How did you arrive at the painting surfaces you employ in your work?

Aaron Johnson: It's been a long slow journey. I didn't get a BFA in college, I got a degree in Molecular Cellular Biology. Meanwhile, painting was a hobby. I got more and more seduced by painting and eventually—to make a long story short—ended up in New York to really be an artist but had no clue what that really meant.

When I moved to New York in 1998, the Jackson Pollock retrospective was up at MoMA, and it blew my mind, I had never heard of the guy nor did I ever fathom the existence of mega-scale drip paintings. My favorite artist prior to seeing the Pollock show was Salvador Dali (my main exposure being a poster I purchased at a head shop in Tucson and then hung it over my bed all through college), so the show was a really shattering experience for me.

I went home to my Lower East Side apartment and started making squirty drip paintings, acrylic squirts on canvas, with dreadful results, but lots of fun. Because I was painting in an apartment and I needed to keep the floor clean, I had plastic on the floor and got intrigued by the “spill-over” squirts of paint that were accumulating on the plastic. Eventually I began peeling the drips off the plastic and collaging them onto canvas. Soon, I was squirting and pouring paint directly onto the plastic and making collage pieces out of the paint solids.

Since 2002-ish, my interest in peeled acrylic solids has continued to evolve into the process that is my practice today. Eventually I did get an MFA from Hunter College in New York, but I was self-taught first, which was crucial to me inventing my own nonconventional process. Lately my paintings are reverse-painted acrylic polymer peels on polyester nets— the nets came into the process in 2005 when I just realized through experimentation that synthetic nets are a great pseudo-canvas for holding together the acrylic peels.

OPP: The “studio” images included on your website give me a clue into your process but I am still curious about the specific steps that go into the making of your often incredibly large paintings. Can you describe your process?

AJ: The works are painted completely in reverse (like reverse glass painting) on clear plastic sheeting. The figures and small details first, the back grounds and loose forms last. At several points in the process the plastic is laid flat and I pour on puddles of squirty paint and clear coats of acrylic polymer. These layers accumulate as I build the picture in reverse, and the layers physically add up to a solid acrylic sheet that is finally peeled off the plastic, and in the end mounted on a polyester mesh.

OPP: What comes first—an idea for a specific person/icon to address conceptually or or an aesthetic idea about texture, pattern and composition, or do they occur to you simultaneously in a recent painting like Freedom From Want?

AJ: They always start with a figurative and/or narrative idea, sometimes from a sketch, sometimes in relationship to contemporary politics, and sometimes from an art-historical precedent. Freedom From Want is my version of the famous Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving painting of the same title. My interest was in articulating how the 1940s American Dream vision of the Rockwell would translate in our contemporary context of our current great American Nightmare. Like a lot of my work, this piece exposes the subverted horror of America. Grandma and Grandpa serving the turkey in my painting have been appropriated directly from the Rockwell, they have turned only slightly monstrous. As the view descends down the composition to the front of the table, we see the characters turn more and more grotesque and fiendish. Among those dining at the table we see a burning earth head, and a horribly wounded veteran. The turkey itself may be a roasted American Eagle. The fixings on the table include severed heads, mashed guts, fuck-burgers, spurting oil rigs, a dead Indian head, mutant sea creatures, etc.—it’s a very loaded painting.

OPP: You seem to have moved away from incorporating collaged material in your paintings as you did in your earlier works. Your paintings from 2009-present accomplish the level of detail the collaged elements previously provided in highly-detailed painted passages. Can you speak about your shift away from collaged materials?

AJ: When I began painting in reverse, it was incredibly difficult to achieve any clear detail, so collage was a convenient and easy way to insert details, mostly National Geographic animal parts, fast food greasy globs, and porno sexy bits. Now I can paint all that stuff in ways that I find more interesting than what I was doing with collage, so as my painting skills improved, collage slipped out of the process.



OPP: In your daily life outside of the studio do you see the people you encounter as the grotesque figures you paint? I imagine you at the grocery store or on the subway looking around and seeing the world through the lens you’ve created for your paintings.

AJ: Haha, not quite. Recently though, I had a dream where I had a meeting with a curator at the gallery, and the curator, upon shaking my hand, turned into the demon critter I was painting in the studio that day—a little undead guy with an emaciated body and long spindly tentacle-like arms. He jumped on me, suddenly I’m naked, and

we’re rolling around on the floor as he is clawing me to shreds, gallery-goers standing around watching like it’s performance art. Then the demon violently digs his claws into my butt-cheek and rips my butt-cheek off as a I awoke with my heart-pounding. Thankfully my butt-cheek still intact.



OPP: That is an amazing dream, I’m glad to hear your butt-cheek survived it! So, if you don’t necessarily see the world through the lens you’ve created for your work, what is inspiration for your grotesque figures?

AJ: Way back when I was a biology student, I used to draw grotesque little creatures in the outlines of my bio lecture notes, which were influenced by the anatomical and biological forms we were studying. I also was crazy about Garbage Pail Kids and Madballs and other comic-grotesque toys as a kid. Fast forward to that Jackson Pollock moment at the MoMA I mentioned before, when I started being a “serious” painter in New York with my squirty abstractions... I had convinced myself that those juvenile/

adolescent monster drawings I used to do were not “serious.” I had a few years of making gooey weird “serious” abstract squirty works, and at a certain point, which coincides with watching 9-11 happen from my Brooklyn roof, I started painting monsters into the works, with a new urgency to speak to political issues happening in our contemporary world. The grotesque nature of my monsters comes from the Madballs and the biology, and from current affairs nightmares, but also very largely from the painting process itself. The reverse painting technique doesn’t allow for much accuracy nor for editing, so the figures end up looking sort of naturally deformed and hideous, which is part of the fun. It’s like the process and the figures grew up together and neither could be what they are without the weird symbiotics involved.

OPP: What are you working on now?

AJ: I’m taking a break from painting. My current solo show Freedom From Want is up at Stux Gallery in New York through October 22nd and I’m working on drawings through the course of the show, in order to generate new ideas and to chillout a bit and not obsess over new paintings just yet. I’m really excited about some tattoos I’m designing for people.

November 2016, web. 20 October 2011 < <http://blog.otherpeoplespixels.com/otherpeoplespixels-interviews-aaron-johnson>>