

AUSTIN LEE INTERVIEWS HENRY HUDSON

AL - I think of the word grotesque when I see your work. A mix of beauty and ugliness. Do you have a comfort or discomfort for either?

HH - Ideas of beauty or ugliness are always in the forefront of my mind. It's almost the corner stone of art, architecture and music isn't it? Our state of mind, our social sub-conscience or powers that be, often choose what is ugly or beautiful from one second, minute, hour to the next and over the course of years. Fashion in the short term is a good way of assessing human behaviour towards the ideas of what is beautiful and what is just ugly. Fashionable art, or trends in art can do the same thing. Time will challenge these accordingly. Questions of aesthetics or what's pleasing on the eye can vary then from person to person. The subjectivity is overwhelming therefore, so I enjoy playing with this idea of ugliness and beauty. Order and chaos. Grotesque art can be a good way of talking about this therefore. Hockney often talks of paintings being "pretty" which often infuriates intellectuals. Often things can appear to be wondrous or beautiful but scratch the surface and things reveal themselves to be grotesque. Nature is like this. A rose, for example, looks beautiful in its present state but it's very existence and it's battle for survival are overwhelming. And of course it's dying as you look at it.

AL - Can art change society or is it just a reflection of it?

HH - Both. We are social people, animals. We make art because we are affected emotionally by what environment we are in. Often throughout the history of art, great works come from periods of great turmoil. We can be moved greatly by an artists ability to simplify a momentarily good or bad situation whether in war or peace. Love or hate. I also believe however, that art should never be placed on a high pedestal. There are far more important issues in the world. But again, it definitely educates us and has the power to make one stop, ponder, think and hopefully take action. It's better than protesting by clicking on a computer screen. I personally don't make art for anyone else in mind. It's quite a selfish career, I'm in no doubt of that. But I hope and enjoy the idea of sharing expressions of the human condition and of our era in history.

AL -What have you learned about yourself through making paintings?

HH - Strangely that I'm actually quite patient. Very patient in fact. Which wasn't what they said at school I can assure you. I guess in this way it's become a good wife to me. I have my ups and downs and disappointments with her like the rest of us. But we kiss and make up and the highs far out way the lows. It's a rock in that way, it never lets me down. It's a never ending language with no full stops. This in itself is

comforting. It doesn't have a pension plan. Having said that I feel quite good today about it all. That can change tomorrow morning.

AL - Do you consider humour part of your work?

HH - I used to yes, for sure. Humour can come closer to truth than many art forms and I like that about humour. Looking back on some of the work I was making, it wasn't funny at all though. The themes I mean. In fact they were very serious. And in some cases self-portraits of bad experiences in my own life. It was just the medium and colour palate and story line that seemed initially 'funny'. My Young Sen series was based on William Hogarth's A Rakes Progress. Which tells the story of a young man squandering his fortune on prostitutes, gambling, drinking, prison and the mad house. As a Brit we take almost pride in these vices with a pointed finger at this character, Tom Rakewell. But it's often one finger pointing forward, eight pointing back. We often have a stiff upper lip here about emotions and humour can break that barrier. I was actually very badly bullied and abused at a boarding school for 5 years. The last year of that I used humour to often help end or deflect the situations I was finding myself in. Taking this and making art it saved me. So yes, I enjoy laughing. Looking forward though I'm using it less and less as my first weapon of choice, the more confident and older I get the less I feel it necessary. I'm enjoying pathos at the moment.

AL - Your paintings are very labor intensive. The end results are so physical that I feel like it would be hard to predict the end result until the work is made. How do you know when something is finished?

HH - Actually I work from sketches, then onto photoshop like you. I spend most of my time mis-taking and correcting on the computer before I start. Due to the sculpting element of what I do, unlike a painter using a brush, once the structure of the work is down I then manipulate the surface with hair dryers and push or add more plasticine depending. I then mark the surface like a painter which is extremely important using brushes, tools, marbles, surface textures, fruit, etching tools, anything really to create texture and marks. Sometimes I punch or head butt the work. My biggest challenge is trying to use a sculptural medium and make it look like it has some movement. Easier in a flick of a brush let's say. I normally layer the works up like impasto paint, one on-top of the other, working from the back to the front. As I know my colour palate extremely well, I use the Pantone colour chart and mix all my own plasticine with pigment like a Renaissance studio. So it's quite methodical and scientific before I even start. The start and end are important to me. The middle bit is like a marathon run.

AL - Do you have a favourite experience with an artwork you've seen?

HH - Many times, at different moments, with different art works. Recently I took magic mushrooms while observing James Turrell's 'skyspace' at a collectors home. And spent many an hour in there alone. It helped shape this body of work in a way.

AL - The colour in your last show was pretty remarkable. To me it's very interesting in how the physicality of the plasticine would affect the way the image is seen. Is that something you've noticed in the work? Do shadows from the thickness of the plasticine affect the colour?

HH – Yes, absolutely. From the photoshop composition to the physical work there is a massive transformation. Some of the works weigh 120 kilos. They have gravitas, and are object like, similar to a sculpture in a way. Yes, shadows sometimes add to the mirage. I'm very keen for people to see my works in the flesh. You have seen them Austin in real life. My work does not translate well on the computer or the digital age. Yours on the other hand has real connection to your audience on social media and the computer format. I've seen in your studio in the past you used some sand or texture on the surface of your works. I also have a portrait of you by you made in Fimo. I see less texture in your work these days. Is this a fair observation to make? And is surface texture not important to you and why not anymore as it seemed to be weighing on your mind at some point?

AL - The physical experience of looking at any artwork is important. It lets you trace the artist's steps. It's evidence of decisions. A slick painting where you can't see any brushstrokes still tells you a lot about the artist and what they care about. It becomes a history of decisions. I see that as one of the strengths of painting as a medium. I like when a painting feels effortless despite all the effort. I've hear you say that people often don't always understand the amount of physical work involved in creating your paintings. For me that is a great compliment if something difficult looks easy. A slam dunk by a great athlete looks easy till you try it.

HH - Yes that's very true. One of the reasons I love your work is that it appears so free and effortless. Of course it's taken you years to get to this point. People really get off on your paintings for this reason and the reasons you've mentioned. It seems to flow out of you naturally. For our English audience we'd say "well bowled."

AL - Do you expect people to understand your work in the same way you understand it?

HH - I don't expect anything from anyone really. My work also isn't in the game of making people feel that they can't understand it. I'm sort of against the idea of alienating anyone, or making someone feel alienated. I like to think of my work as

inclusive. I'm in the Hockney "pretty" tribe. I like this quote from Lucian Freud. "I think that the greatest characteristic of genius is above all energy. Hence, what I detest most of all of the arts, what sets me on edge, is the in-genius, the clever. This is not at all the same thing as bad taste, which is a good quality, gone wrong. In order to have what is called bad taste, you must have a sense of the poetry. This cleverness, on the contrary, is incompatible with genuine poetry."

I would like people to get in front of my work at least once as it's physicality is a major part of what it is. I wouldn't be painting what I'm making with plasticine. What I've achieved though with the medium and techniques are unique so even if you don't like the subject matter or composition, at least your eye is landing on something new, different. They invite the eye to constantly wonder. You also have this with your work Austin. Does it make it easier for you as an artist or more of a challenge?

AL- I love that quote and definitely relate to it. Earlier you mentioned art being selfish or indulgent. I think art always has a built in duality. It's indulgent but it also makes you vulnerable so it takes certain amount of generosity to do it. It is a form of sharing. I once took a class that was about exploring consciousness. Since it was a computer science class I was surprised when he had us reading classical literature like Emily Dickinson. He said that the best and only way to understand consciousness was through art. That really stuck with me and makes a lot of sense. Its like a vague diary of humanity.

With my own work, I don't overthink things. I do first and think later. For me it is more of allowing yourself the freedom to explore the unknown. Following your curiosity and sharing what you find with someone else. If I know what I'm doing before doing it what's the point.

HH - Yes this makes you a painter in every aspect. I personally have lots of assistants in my studio and have done for nearly 5 years due my medium and to what I do, so I've lost quite a bit of personal, alone time in an 8 hour studio day. I'm lucky to get 2 hours to focus on smaller works I can manage myself. I do miss the very private, ritualistic, isolating, freedom of being a painter and being alone in the studio. One on one. This is changing slowly but it's a space/money issue which is boring to talk about but a reality we all have to face. If I'm being truthful I was never that good at painting. It never sat that comfortably with me. I studied video and performance and prior to that my works have always been more 3 dimensional. My grandmother was a code breaker and model maker, my father a sculptor, my mother a chef and brother a ceramicist. We all use our hands directly. I always looked at painters as mysterious figures and I looked up to them as they seem the bravest out of all of us. I'm horribly co-dependent, so this was never going to happen without shit loads of therapy. Or lots of dogs. Maybe I need a pack of dogs.

AL - The digital depth scan prints are interesting since they capture the essence of the physicality of your paintings yet remain flat. Can you talk about the process with those a little bit?

HH - Thanks. Yes these depth maps came about when I met Adam Lowe from Factum Arte in Madrid. We took one of his Lucida 3D scanners and collected the surface data off the paintings. Took an x-ray of it essentially, its depth map and printed them onto digital paper so the surface is flat as you mentioned. They look like big charcoal drawings which I love. It's amazing using technology to explore your work further. I also made some Woodbury type prints using the data. It's fascinating using technology in this way, especially to explore historical methods. On that note I'm very excited about your sculptures Austin, I can't wait to see more, they blow my mind.

AL - The physicality and handmade touch of your work is clearly an intentional decision. It does seem to be a response to a culture of flat digital images dominating most people's day to day lives. How do you feel about the way humans are using technology currently? Do you think it is making our lives better or worse?

HH - Yes. I was born in 1982 so when I was about 16 in 1998 it was right on the curve of early Photoshop, digital drawing, painting on personal computers etc. I wouldn't say I ignored it but I didn't embrace it entirely either. Plus it was rather basic back then. Having then done performance based work for the next 6 years, when I came back to the drawing board, technology was so advanced and many artists seem to have developed such a hold of it, I felt a little out of touch. I use photoshop all the time now to put together compositions, and can get around it but I don't make work that comments directly about it or the digital world. I still love seeing a physical artwork with my own eyes. Of course and you will never ever capture the surface energy and complexity of a work via a screen. I suffer for this aspect personally in the digital age. Your work wonderfully challenges these issues.

Artistically speaking though the internet is totally bonkers. I create entire compositions based on images sourced on the internet, like little worlds, and distort reality in whatever manner I choose. All from sitting in front of my computer. You just need an imagination, even a small one in fact, and click, click, click.

AL - Can you talk about the collaboration with your brothers for the last show? Have you ever worked together in the past?

HH - My brother makes ceramics, wooden sculptures and is a production designer for films. I really got into the ideas of shamanism and indigenous peoples from the books of Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes who documented the hallucinogenic properties of the plants and vegetation deep inside the jungles of South America. Through this I began to think about vessels, pots, ceramics and the rituals

around them. Richard's works are hand coiled using traditional tribal methods. We sketched out shapes based off the plasticine works and we then used tri-colour spray paints.

RH - My ceramics and wood sculptures are based on prehistoric shapes, bones and rock formations made and found in nature. They are loosely based on ethnic potteries created by tribal elders, burnt clay and wood for practical uses. Collaborating with Henry had me start looking at the use of colour rather than my very natural earthen tones. The shapes based on the tribal pots found by archeological digs and mixed with exotic plant shapes, led us to the works presented.