

March 2014

Aaron Curry

HOLLYWOOD RATS

Interview by Alexis Vaillant



Aaron Curry's fucked up art is shaped by an explicit post-digital approach to the spectacular visual languages of the present. Drawing from the art-historical lineage of cubism, graffiti, cartoons, figurative painting and gestural abstraction, and appropriating subjects from mythology, advertising, print culture and consumerism, Aaron Curry's eagerly awaited survey exhibition at CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux next summer is as much about the breakdown of the human condition as it is the absurdities that define the perils of human evolution. Interview with the exhibition curator Alexis Vaillant.

When did you move down to LA?

In 2003.

Where were you based before?

Chicago.

Did you study art there? With whom?

Yes. I moved to Chicago in 1991 to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. I worked with Karl Wirsum and Barbara Rossi mostly, but there were a lot of great teachers I had contact with including Susanne Doremus and Richard Rezac.

Why did you decide to go to LA?

I had been looking to LA for some time. I used to work at the school library and I had seen the catalog for Helter Skelter in the early 90's. Before then, I wasn't sure how I really fit into things; the art that I was interested in, and the way I approached making art, seemed outside of what was happening everywhere else. Seeing artists like Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Paul McCarthy, Lari Pittman and Liz Larner for the first time really blew me away. It was like nothing else I had come across in the publications that were going through the library at the time. Remember, this is before the internet, so in order to research and see what was going on in the world outside of Chicago, one had to really put in the time and dig through magazines, books, and catalogs. I was really tuned in to Chicago, the Chicago Imagists, and artists like Peter Saul and H.C. Westermann. I was also looking at a few German artists from the 80's, like Polke and Immendorff, but other than that, the things going on in New York and Europe didn't make sense to me. Relational aesthetics was somewhat of a buzz kill. I didn't get it, and didn't really want to. I learned later that a lot of the artists in the Helter Skelter show were teaching in Schools out here, and after finishing my undergraduate degree I moved here to study with some of them.

What do you like most there today?

Well, it's an extremely creative atmosphere. It's a beautiful place as well as a very private one, if you want it to be.

What do you hate most?

Rats. I bought a house in Hollywood a few years ago and found out that there are rats living in the hills. They freak me out.



At what moment did you decide to become an artist, if that is something one can decide? What were the reasons and in which context?

As far back as I can remember I wanted to be an artist. I had no idea what that meant until about 20 years ago, but I always loved drawing as a kid. I remember tracing over record album covers when I was in elementary school. Later when I was in middle and high school, Punk rock and New Wave had a big impact on me. It was as much of a music scene as it was a visual one. From album covers and concert flyers, to zines and skateboard graphics. When I got to art school, all of the things that excited me were really out of vogue. People were getting naked and rubbing charcoal on themselves or sitting and reading poetry as a work of art. It sounds interesting now, at least the naked part, but it didn't make sense to me at the time. Which is why I was drawn to the Chicago Imagists and artists like Saul and Westermann. There was an emphasis on image making with them and I wanted to make weird pictures at the time.

What were your hopes, taboos and reference points then? And now?

I wanted to be as good of an artist as the ones I looked up to. I don't know that there were any taboos. I think I liked that the artists I was interested in weren't in fashion, but it also made me feel like an outsider.

What did your very 'first' piece look like? And what about the last one?

To be honest, I don't remember. I usually work on several things at one time. Right now I have somewhere between 8-10 paintings going, and 5 or so sculptures. It's kind of an organic process where the works develop together as a whole.

Should the notion of evolution characterize your work or not? And why?

Sure. I'm always trying to move my work and ideas forward. I end up repeating themes and forms probably for this very reason, to see how far I can push them.

How did everything start?

I'm not sure what you mean by everything. I've been making art seriously, but not so successfully since 1990 when I left high school. I probably didn't make anything good until around 2000 because I needed those years to figure out who I was as an artist, my vision, and to find the confidence in it. I spent my 20's trying to make work that looked like other artists, and it wasn't until I got to Los Angeles and through graduate school that I figured out who I was as artist.

Looking back at your body of work, how would you sum up your art production?

As an extension of my life. I look back at it like looking through old photos. It's personal. I remember exactly what happened that year, the things in my life I was interested in, artists I was looking at, ideas of color and form, concepts I was dealing with, struggling with, reacting to, etc.

How many artworks have you produced?

I'm not sure. I'm in my studio almost every day. Some things are finished very fast, in one day, and others will take months to finish.

What does your production ambivalently mirror?

Hmm. I'm not sure. For one, I actually don't think about my work in the terms of production. It's something I do everyday, all day. It is what my life revolves around, or more accurately, it's what my life predominately consists of. What ends up being finished and put out in the world, taken out of my studio and put in galleries or collections, is, in my mind, really more a question for you, the curator. To me it is like a drug or alcohol: I'm an addict, and it helps me get through the day.

In relation to the quantity of works produced, would you say your corpus has a kind of 'vacuum' logic?

The quantity is pretty abstract to me because I don't have a real gauge. I have friends that produce a lot less than me and others that produce a lot more. But I never think about my work in those terms. There is a logic in the sense that the works feel like part of the same wave. For example, the works that I made last year, whether they are paintings, collages, or sculptures, I think feel like they were made by the same person around the same time. They share a quality or feeling, even if it isn't directly recognizable.

What's your relation with mass production?

The same as most people I guess. I am drawn to methods of production used by things that are made in masses, like silkscreen for example. But only because it is another way of making an image. The idea of mass production doesn't have any interest to me.

What do you understand of the reception of your work and its massive success with private collectors over the past 10 years?

What are the consequences today?

To be honest, I'm a little out of touch when it comes to the reception of my work. I hardly ever get to see things after they leave my studio, so it feels pretty abstract.

In what way(s) do you consider your work as being part of the production system in general?

I don't. I think if I thought about it in those terms I probably wouldn't make anything at all. I'd feel like a tool.



How do you decide upon the silhouette a sculpture may have?

It's a process that usually starts with a sketch. From there I draw it out on plywood and then draw over it again using a saw, cutting it out. I try and stand it up, look at how it functions in space, and then alter again if I feel it needs to be. If the form feels exciting to me for one reason or another I stick with it.

Speak about your practice of collage.

Well, in a way everything I make is in some way related to the idea of collage. I do make works of paper that are labeled as collages, but I approach my sculptures and paintings in the same sort of way. It's basically a game of action and reaction.

What about the new terrifying oval paintings you've done recently?

Ha. I didn't think about them as terrifying, but now that you say it, I guess they are. It's probably the reason that none of them sold. Haha. They were part of a show last year at Almine's that was based around an idea that jelled after reading an interview with Jack Kirby. He was discussing his comic the New Gods, and described the series as his attempt to make new gods by thinking about what we would make now as a society if our old ones were to die or disappear. I started to think about what people today perceive as perfection, and living in Hollywood, I thought about how people are obsessed with looking young, and how they achieve this through body mutilation and makeup. So I started with children. For the show I wanted to exhibit the Gods and their creations. The oval paintings were the gods and the sculptures their creations.

How long have you been working as an artist? As both a witness and a player, how do you see the evolution of contemporary art?

I've been working for 20 something years, 10 of those, some would say successfully. I think things exist on a more even playing field today. Back when I was in Chicago we had the death of painting debate, and there were terms like New Media floating around, which is hilarious to think about today because that was mostly videos on VHS tapes. It appears to be a much more open, multidimensional playing field. We aren't all looking to app art as the new and only form of expression, thank the new gods.

