

ART *interview* ONLINE Magazine

BRENDAN DAVIS AND JAMES ESBER, ART-INTERVIEW.COM, ISSUE 11, FEB, 2009

Art Interview: James, what was it like for you growing up?

James Esber : I was born in 1961 in Cleveland, Ohio and had a working class childhood. My father was a fireman and bricklayer. My mother was a homemaker. We lived in a mundane ranch house in the suburbs, in a neighborhood where every house looked alike except for the trim color. Our neighborhood was fairly ethnic; there were a lot of Italians, Polish and Czechoslovakians living there at the time. In the 1970's my contact with the world was mainly through television, books and movies and I felt that everything interesting happened in other places. So, once I finished college I couldn't wait to settle some place else and I immediately moved to New York.

Art Interview: Cleveland has a nice museum and a decent art school, but coming from a middle class family in the mid-west I would think that you were fairly limited to the arts. How were you introduced to the art world?

James Esber : There was no reason that I should have become an artist other than the fact that I began to see myself as an artist when I was young. I was always very good at making art even at a very young age. My parents weren't particularly geared towards pushing me in any academic direction. If I had been given more direction or had been more mature I probably would have studied something other than art. But, I found my own way and when I finished high school I was offered a full scholarship at the Cleveland Institute of Art. But when I was young I had a very limited connection to the professional art scene because Cleveland is geographically removed from its center. I did however make a few trips to New York City when I went through my junior and senior years of college.

Art Interview: Was the Cleveland Institute of Art able to prepare you for a career in the arts?

James Esber : Unfortunately we weren't given much preparation for an art career there. However the education at the Cleveland Institute of Art was great. Within the first two years it provided me with a complete foundation in drawing, design and color theory. That knowledge was, and still is, very valuable to me in my art-making process. Even though today I don't paint in a realistic manner and I prefer to break

the rules of art rather than follow them, it's still good to have a solid foundation to work from.

Art Interview: Were there any professors there who influenced you?

James Esber : No single person has had an overriding influence on me. But I did think quite a bit about ideas of one professor named Carroll Cassill, who is not very well known. He taught intaglio printmaking techniques by combining the eastern philosophies that are used in Chinese landscape painting and the mark making principles of integrity and intensity, which he learned from Mauricio Lasansky. Lasansky is an Argentinean artist who must be in his 90s now. He lived in New York City, but he's been based in Iowa City, Iowa for over 55 years. Those ideas of intense and autonomous marks still carry through in my drawings today. When you look at sections of my drawings you can see that the marks have an expressive beauty to them. They aren't just marks that function in the service of creating an illusion.

Art Interview: In addition to your use of powerful mark making and linear flow you seem to have a command over the juxtaposition of intense colors. This somehow reminds me of the color theories of Josef Albers. Did you receive a solid introduction to color theory at the Cleveland Institute of Art?

James Esber : I did. I had a teacher named Joseph McCullough who was a student of Josef Albers at Yale and he taught his theory of color relativity. Albers thought about color with a theorist approach and I think it is important not to forget the emotional dimension of color. But I find it just amazing that the relativity of color is so pervasive. Each color you put onto a painting really does affect the identity of every other color.

Art Interview: I understand you spent some time in Italy as a student?

James Esber : Yes, I spent a year in Italy. The first semester I went to SACI - the Studio Arts Center International in Florence. After that I transferred to Temple University in Rome for a little change of scenery and because I had two friends in grad school there whose work I really admired. I also thought it would be fun to hang out with them.

Art Interview: Did traveling abroad at that young age have an influence on your development?

James Esber : I think it did. My sense of color really changed after being immersed in Italian paintings. Caravaggio had a huge influence on me in terms of composition and color palette.

Art Interview: Did you have any other role models while you were developing as

an artist?

James Esber : One person I was aware of, very early on, was Norman Rockwell. Most people don't consider him a real artist; but when I was a kid I really admired his work. It's a hard thing to quantify, but what makes one illustrator better than the other is their ability to make things seem real. He had a unique ability to articulate and animate detail in his drawings. Every figure and object has an odd presence and intensity of sorts. His work became a source material for me because I could chew on it piece by piece and spit it out as something else.

(Laughs) Another artist I certainly was aware of while growing up was Picasso. In general he was the role model who indirectly taught me what an artist did and what the life of an artist was like. (Laughs) But my life has turned out nothing like Picasso's. When I was young I thought there were only two possibilities: That I would completely fail and end up doing something else, or that I would be famous and my work would be in museums. Now I realize there are many levels between these two extremes. Having an interesting life as an artist doesn't necessitate selling all your work and making a fortune. It's essential if you're going to live life as an artist, to love being in the studio. Working in the studio every day, having the privilege of traveling, smart and interesting people and being in shows is a pretty successful life. I've accepted that and I appreciate it.

Art Interview: Would you say that working as an artist is a viable career?

James Esber : Yes. There are all kinds of art worlds and all kinds of levels within those art worlds. You just have to find your niche. The longer you do something the more legitimacy it has. So, the trick is to have passion for what you do and survive economically until that passion becomes profitable.

Art Interview: Did you intend to become a professional artist when you were in school?

James Esber : When I was young I didn't have a clear idea of how I would make a living. But I knew I wanted to paint and draw regardless of whether or not I could make my living from it. Even at an early age I knew I would create art my entire life. When I moved to New York City I certainly had the intention of attempting a professional career in the arts.

Art Interview: How did you begin your career?

James Esber : I didn't have anyone in my family that I could financially rely upon, so in the first week that I came to New York I found a part-time job working as a decorative painter and mural artist. I did that on and off for 12 years, but during that period I spent as much time as I could in my studio. I would even sometimes turn down jobs when they called.

In 1986 I had the good fortune of moving to Williamsburg, which was just starting to bloom with artists. (Laughs) It was a cheap place to live so it was an ideal place for

artists to move if you needed space to work. Real estate wasn't in high demand then because the neighborhood was completely derelict. There were a lot of stripped cars around and crack viles were everywhere. Through the mid-eighties artists filtered in and we all began to realize just how many of us were actually there. Gradually people began opening galleries and artists started to congregate at certain bars. It took a while for me to learn to negotiate the social structure of the art world. I'm not a particularly social person and it was difficult. But, I made friends with other artists and we began to have open studios. We would visit each other's studios and help each other by sending dealers and curators to each other's place.

Art Interview: How did you go about approaching your first few galleries and finding support for your work?

James Esber : The most concrete way I realized success was by having exhibitions and becoming accepted into the gallery world. When I entered the New York art world of the late 1980's the stock market had crashed and we were experiencing an economic lull. Some of my shows didn't sell out; that took a while and it was kind of rough. I've shown fairly steadily since I got here, but there were periods where I've had less attention than other times. As an artist you have to find people to give you support when you're not getting it from the so-called establishment.

It took a while for me to get gallery representation. I did a number of group shows and had exhibitions in alternative spaces. Bill Arning was the first curator I ever had over and I thought the visit went terribly. At the time he had a space called White Columns and he was a curator famous for visiting hundreds of studios each year. A little later, in 1987, he called and invited me to show at White Columns. That was my first show in New York. Then around 1993 I was in a couple high profile shows in the Ronald Feldman Gallery.

Art Interview: How did you manage to get into shows at the Ronald Feldman Gallery?

James Esber : A friend sent a curator to look at the works of my wife Jane Fine and I. They were organizing a show called "Faux" at Ronald Feldman Gallery, which was a show about artificiality. They liked my work and it fit into their concept so they included me.

Art Interview: How difficult was it for you to become self-sufficient as an artist?

James Esber : In order to be an artist you have to have a personality with a high threshold for financial insecurity. You have to be able to ignore the fact that you have a precarious financial existence. There were definitely a number of years that my wife and I didn't have health insurance and we just managed to scrape by.

I met my wife in 1986 when I was looking for a place to live in Williamsburg. She

needed a roommate and I had answered her ad in the Village Voice. But I ended up moving into a place a couple blocks away from her and later she moved in with me. I've been living in this same building for 22 years. In New York rent is the biggest cost but since I got our place early the rent stayed cheap. About ten years ago we had the option not only to buy our apartment, but also the entire four-story building. Since then we have been renting a couple of units, which pays our mortgage every month. This was the biggest financial boon for us.

Art Interview: Have you competed for various fellowships or awards?

James Esber : I've won a fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts twice and a Pollock- Krasner Grant a couple years ago. I also applied for the Guggenheim Fellowship Award about 5 times but I haven't won it yet. I want to apply for the Rome Prize as well.

Art Interview: When was your first museum exhibition?

James Esber : I was in my first museum group show in 1998. It was called, "Pop Surrealism" and was at the Aldridge Museum of Contemporary Art. It was a great show to be in and got a fair amount of press. That exhibition had the distinction of having the smallest catalog I've ever seen, which was about 4 inches squared. A few years ago I was also in the SITE Santa Fe Biennial, a show curated by Robert Storr. That was probably the highest visibility exhibition I've been in. I still hear from people who say they liked my work at that show. In 2007 I had my first one person museum show at the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art in North Carolina. It was a mini-retrospective of sorts.

Art Interview: What is an average day like for you?

James Esber : Occasionally I do lectures as a visiting artist at various colleges, but otherwise I'm in the studio. It's not hard for me to sit down to start working. I don't need inspiration to work the way I used to. I know what I need to do in the studio and I enjoy doing it. But having a studio at home can be both good and bad because there are no definite time schedules. When I first began making art I questioned what I was doing and sometimes that could be paralyzing. Over the years I've come to terms with what I like and what I do well. I've learned that you have to follow your passion and that will eventually pay off.

Art Interview: Has the introduction of your son been a challenge for you?

James Esber : Having a child is a challenge in more ways than one, but with the introduction of school things do get easier. You just have to organize your time better.

Art Interview: How did you discover the main focus of your work?

James Esber : I've learned that it is better if I think less rather than more about subject matter. I used to sometimes work with ideas that I was invested in intellectually, but not emotionally. I chose things which made logical sense in the context of my formal concerns. Now I simply follow my intuitions on subject matter. I look at a lot of images on the Internet and constantly make little sketches in Photoshop. The things that stay with me are the ones that will end up being developed into paintings.

Art Interview: Do you think that your upbringing in the American Midwest has subconsciously effected your choice in subject matter?

James Esber : Often it is not subconscious. I choose images that relate directly and indirectly to my childhood. A good example of this is the image of Richard Nixon. He was the first politician that I was aware of when I was a kid and he was someone highly caricatured in the newspapers. His face became an icon. I've also worked with images from the Vietnam War because they have a deep resonance for me. When I was a young boy I didn't fully understand what these war images were about and I used to try to visualize a the world around them. I've been criticized for using images which are outside of my own experience and therefore understanding. But I think images first encountered and ingrained during childhood often become part of ones personal history in a way they would not if we first saw them as an adult.

Art Interview: Do you make a conscious effort to tie together the various subjects that you work with together or do you just follow your intuition?

James Esber : I get a strong intuitive feeling when images work together. I do a lot of sketches with various combinations of images. Invariably, I'll end up being drawn to the images that work together and somehow balance, but don't make real sense together. When I create an image the meaning comes from the audience's interpretation of the piece. This interpretation can change depending on a show's context and time frame. I am a strong believer that the artist doesn't create meaning; the viewer constructs it.

Art Interview: Did your style develop gradually?

James Esber : It's been gradual with a few abrupt changes thrown in. I've always believed in just following my passion and interests. I don't think about what's current. Early on in New York I became interested in optical distortions - how the brain and eyes respond to optical cues. I was at a friend's house and he had this book on anamorphic projections. It had weirdly distorted images that you could almost recognize and looking at it was a Eureka moment for me. When you distort an image to a certain point it loses its ability to function as representation and turns into a weird new object.

This provided me with a springboard for my work. It's difficult to manipulate and

distort an image to the point that it gains autonomy, becoming both an image and an object. I started looking for ways to achieve extreme distortion in my painting. I painted images on stretched fabrics and attached them to paintings. Then I stretched other kinds of patterned fabric around the images to make a background. My second phase was when I discovered Plasticine because it had a lot of potential for making distortions in a more facile way.

Art Interview: How did you come up with the idea of working with Plasticine?

James Esber : I was teaching an art class at a public school to 5 and 6 year old kids. They kept large quantities of plasticine in their storage room, so we started making sculptures with it. That was when a light bulb went off in my head! With Plasticine I could physically construct and stretch the image with my hands. So, I went back to my studio and started making images with Plasticine directly on the walls. Later I changed to making them on panels so they are easier to transport and can still appear to be part of the wall.

Art Interview: Is the color in Plasticine fugitive?

James Esber : I've been working with the material for over ten years and none of my pieces have faded. I have however taken the precaution of covering the work with a brush-on acrylic varnish. This allows the pieces to be cleanable.

Art Interview: Are there problems with transporting your Plasticine works due to the material's elasticity?

James Esber : Plasticine does remain soft because it's an oil-based material without dryers in it, but I haven't experienced any problems transporting the work. You have to handle them carefully so I build special handles on the panels that allow you to carry them without touching the surface. I also use a custom made crate for each piece.

Art Interview: Is it hard to photograph your work?

James Esber : Yes, it's always hard to convey what a piece looks like in a photograph. I've had photographers try to saturate the surface with light, but that makes the surface appear even. I always have to direct them to create shadows in order to bring out the texture of the surface.

Art Interview: What materials do you use for your paintings and drawings?

James Esber : The paintings are acrylic on PVC panels (Polyvinyl chloride). I also do a lot of drawings on paper with colored ink. Each medium you work with provides specific sets of challenges. I can't say which medium I prefer. There are good things about drawings and good things about painting. The great thing about drawing on paper is that it's fast and kind of a one shot thing. In a sense, any imperfections that

might happen make the drawings more interesting. Painting on the other hand is a very different practice. I love it because you can work and re-work a painting. This allows you to consider the relationships within the painting and refine its space.

Art Interview: How long does it take for you to do a painting compared to a Plasticine piece?

James Esber : It really depends on the size. People think the Plasticine pieces take a long time but they can actually be very fast. Like drawings, they're a one shot deal. Paintings on the other hand usually take a little longer. Often I'll let paintings sit for a while to allow myself to figure out what they need.

Art Interview: Do you work on several pieces at a time?

James Esber : I try to, but I'm not as good at it as I should be. I admire artists who have 10 things going in their studio at once, but I usually get obsessed with one piece.

Art Interview: I understand that sometimes you make art with your wife Jane Fine?

James Esber : Yes, It was a bit freakish when we first met and saw each other's paintings. Our works were very similar because we were both influence by Phillip Guston. But our approaches to art making are almost completely opposite. We both work in the terrain between figuration and abstraction, but we come at it from different directions. I work towards abstraction by dissecting found images and reconstructing them with distortion in different media. Jane on the other hand starts in a more improvisational manner by mark making and she adds bits of figuration to the work as it develops.

There is an interesting dynamic when you live and work with someone. We've had studios side by side for a number of years and I think working in proximity has forced each of us to stake out our own ground. It's helped us identify our innate tendencies and probably amplified them to some extent. In retrospect you can see how those differences developed.

Art Interview: Recently you had an exhibition at Pierogi Gallery of collaboration drawings that you did together with your wife and exhibited under the name of J. Fiber.

James Esber : Yes, it was the first time we've shown works that we've done together. I can't remember whose idea it was to have a show, or who suggested it first. But the owner of Pierogi Gallery, Joe Amrhein, saw some drawings we were working together on and he liked them. So, we agreed to do a show.

Art Interview: Why did you start drawing together?

James Esber : I can't account for why we started doing this, but it has worked out for us. Perhaps it shouldn't have worked as fluidly as it has, but I think because we know each other's work and tendencies so well we can easily communicate without talking. There's virtually no structure in our collaboration. We simply pass a drawing back and forth. I really like losing control in the work. When someone else has their hands on the steering wheel half the time it moves you in different directions.

Art Interview: Has your collaboration caused any difficulties maintaining your own individual identities?

James Esber : I'm not aware of it affecting my personal work. If anything, it's just made me appreciate more the act of taking risks and allowing drawings to develop without knowing where they are going.