

EAST CITY ART



East City Art Interviews: Academy 2012 Artist Alexander Peace

By Eric Hope, July 31, 2012

One work which caught my eye at this year's *Academy 2012* exhibition at Conner Contemporary was [Alexander Peace's](#) *Jan Brueghel Flower Painting*. Luscious, oversized and multilayered, the piece seemed on the surface a contemporary reengineering of a century's old motif. Yet in a [recent interview with East City Art](#), Jamie Smith, the exhibition's curator, described the work as a "modern breakdown of forms", indicating that more than simple reinterpretation is at play. She was quick to put me in touch with Mr. Peace for an in-depth discussion of his work.



"Jan Brueghel Flower Painting" Image courtesy of the artist.

Peace is within walking distance of the gallery in a light, airy walkup overlooking the burgeoning H Street, NE corridor. The affable artist met me at the door, cold water in hand (a blessing in the 100 degree heat!), and gave a quick tour of the one-room studio before getting down to business. The tidy room is dominated on one side by a large work table streaked with oils and on the other by bookshelves filled with artist

profiles. The piece in the Conner show was but one in a body of work covering floral still lifes, and he had another canvas on-hand to discuss.

Simultaneously thoughtful and energetic, Peace exudes the earnestness of a recent graduate starting to put academic theory into practice, talking with his hands as much as his voice. “The artist’s role is to create [and] show us the gray areas we aren’t seeing,” he avows. Ironically he has been painting for less than a year; his academic background is actually in sculpture and conceptual art (“finding a problem and coming up with a solution” was his usual *m.o.*). As a teenager in middle America he entered the art world obliquely through graffiti, but “had no idea what art was” until he attended college in Indianapolis. He recently received his MFA at the University of Maryland and chose to remain in D.C.



"Courbet Flower Painting" Image courtesy of the artist.

where he is, to use his words, “intentionally incubating”. According to Peace, the District is a “dense, complicated, multilayered space” with a pulse he hasn’t noticed in other cities. Living in a walkable city challenges his art; “something changes when you’re on your feet,” he says as he relates an anecdote about attempting to recreate a color palette he saw on the Capital dome at sunset. In a region steeped in history, he loves to explore how we build our own, personal historical narratives.

Clearly this idea of historical narratives informs his work, so I asked him if this reworking of still lifes was akin to wandering in the footsteps of past masters. The hand gestures step up a notch as he gets into the meat of his theory. “My job is to understand what has been done before, but [its] not my job to contextualize.” Peace claims his paintings are not still lifes. Rather, they are object studies of a universal *form* – an artistic constant – that continually resurfaces throughout the history of art. According to Peace:

The painting isn't just an image. It is less like a photo and more like an object that moves through space [and] just happens to have paint on it. [While] it will always be [considered as] a painting, it has a usefulness as an object. It is a form and the expression is aside from that.

Peace states that a vase full of flowers as an artistic form is a constant image in the stream of artistic time, noting "it works, it has worked and will always work as a form." In the context of a pure, artistic form, the work is essentially rendered content-less, escaping the trappings of its visual characteristics.



"Gauguin Flower Painting" Image courtesy of the artist.

This context allows the artist to manipulate the form, leaving certain things in and taking certain things out at will, while injecting a bit of themselves into the work in the process. Peace identifies this form as one of three hierarchical genres — figurative, landscape and still life — with this form resting on the lowest rung of complexity.

With this in mind, the observer can look at the painting through a different lens. Gone are the individual stems, petals and flower arrangements. Absent too is the solidity of the vase and table upon which it rests. In its place are swaths and swatches of pure color that refuse to conform to conventional notions of perspective. Brushstrokes of background pigments find themselves swirling into the fray, becoming botanical elements themselves and further confusing the mind's eye. In Peace's lexicon, it is no longer a painting of flowers (typical still life) but a flower painting (pure form).

His use of color is captivating, as are the scale of the works (all clocking in at four by five feet). As a form study, I assumed decisions about the color palette would take on heightened significance. Surprisingly, this isn't always the case. While Peace relies on intuition and tries never to repeat himself by using the same color twice, he likes to obtain some of his paints second hand, often scouring commercial websites like

Craigslist for pre-used materials. While price is a consideration (acrylics aren't cheap), Peace enjoys this second-hand nature, "because someone else has made the [color] decisions for you." The effect is that he gets colors he might not necessarily choose off store shelf.

Where color might be arbitrary, the scale is carefully thought out. Peace relates the size of the piece to the scale of the body, reiterating his earlier statement that a he injects a piece of himself into the work and stating, "this is how I want myself to be seen." There is definitely a visual "sweet-spot" for viewing the work. Stand too close and one only sees daubs of paint. Stand too far and it no longer feels in command of the wall-space. I likened this to the idea of personal space, where cultural mores subtly dictate the distance we maintain between one another. Taking this concept further, the size of the works injects a quiet confidence into the space without bravado. Intimate, small-scale works are a self-reflection of an artist's inner experience according to Peace. Here he places his musings on center stage for the world to see.



"Picasso Flower Painting" Image courtesy of the artist.

As our conversation drew to a close, I asked him about his future plans. Peace notes that at this point in his artistic career, he's happy just exploring this specific genre. He likes to make bodies of multiple works spanning one concept, so we can expect more of these *flower paintings* in the near future. He refuses to typecast himself, noting that as he matures as an artist, he fully expects new interests to arise. For now, he is merely content to paint.