Honigman, Ana Finel, Jon Pylypchuk in Conversation with Ana Finel Honigman, The Saatchi Gallery
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JON PYLYPCHUK IN CONVERSATION WITH ANA FINEL HONIGMAN

jon_pylypchuk_hopefully1.jpg
Jon Pylypchuk, Hopefully, I will live through this with a little bit of dignity, 2005

Stuffed animals are children’s psychic stunt-doubles as they channel their emotional needs, imaginative desires and sometimes sadistic urges onto their companions’ inanimate, plush, cuddly bodies. As a child’s displaced emotions are focused on the anthropomorphized fabric, and the toy becomes a friend, a victim and a surrogate, and its battered, mangled body is evidence that it was genuinely loved.

With insightfully tender awareness of the dynamic between child and thing, Jon Pylypchuk makes morose, moving and unsettling sculptures and collage paintings that resemble children’s crafts and toys. His work summons up the ability of children to animate and empathize with objects, from a marketed, pre-packaged animal character to the random scrap of cloth that a lonely child invests with emotions and a secret psychological life. The patchwork surfaces of Pylypchuk’s large-scale collages are constructed from wallpaper, scraps of fabric, paint, glitter and glue. The landscape backgrounds he paints are a muddy blend of bright colors populated by animal-like characters made from scraps and bits of cloth, paint and paper whose abusive, defeated and self-effacing dialogues with each other float in text bubbles over their pathetic forms.

Like the grunge aesthetic in the 1990s or Mike Kelley’s plush animals in ironically adult situations, Pylypchuk’s art is vulnerable and aggressive, child-like and smart, cool and nerdy, angry and hurt. The elliptical scraps of thought that are Pylypchuk’s paintings’ text recall lyrics by Kurt Cobain. Thus, a black heart on thin legs says to a wallpaper figure in a 2001 painting, ‘This waiting is all I’ve seen.’ And the wallpaper person answers, ‘It could be the last time you forgive me now.’ These painfully poignant images may seem like drawings taken from children’s therapy sessions, but the sophistication of the emotions they express are evidence of Pylypchuk’s adult intelligence instead. And while his sculptures consist of stuffed animals posed in unhappy situations, their disheveled bodies look as though the person who made them was too depressed to care, and the child intended to play with them was aware of how little effort was put into their ragged construction.

Though Pylypchuk evokes the sensibility of children, his creations actually exist in an adult world of violence, sex, war, exploitation, heartache, heartbreak, alienation and loneliness. They function in either the world of a mistreated child exposed to adult realities too soon, or the symbolic world-view of an adult satirizing immature adult behavior, as in his 2006 sculptural installation Hopefully, I will live through this with a little bit of dignity, where two armies of gangly, identically dressed fox-like grey animals fight a bloody, futile-feeling battle.

George Orwell understood that Dickens was unique because he ‘has been able to stand both inside and outside the child’s mind.’ Few contemporary visual artists have been able to produce work that evokes the darker associations of childhood - the sense that the world is enormous, sinister and overwhelming, emotions are all-consuming but objects can be friends - while still exhibiting a clear, mature sense of composition and craft. In a 2001 review of Pylypchuk’s first solo show at Friedrich Petzel, his New York gallery, New York Times art critic Roberta Smith described his work as ‘combining the scale and heft of 1980s painting with the attenuated pathos of 90s abject art... [his] enormous collagelike paintings, suggest a Hallmark Cards/outsider art reprise of Synthetic Cubism.'

Pylypchuk was born in 1972 in Winnipeg, Canada. He received his MFA from the University of California in Los Angeles, where he had his first solo show in 1996. He lives in Los Angeles and exhibits with LA’s China Art Objects gallery. His 2001 show at the Friedrich Petzel gallery was titled 'No Crying, No Arms, Mournful Thoughts Society.' His work is currently included in the 'USA Today' show at the Royal Academy which is on in London until 4 November.

ANA FINEL HONIGMAN: Do you sympathize with the characters in your work or do you feel schadenfreude seeing their misery?

JON PYLYPCHUK: Some of the situations that are in my work are either interactions I have had or interactions I have witnessed. I inherited from my mother a really cut-and-dried reaction to things. I love them or I hate them. They are either beautiful or ugly. Though my reaction to things is not as extreme as my mother’s, and I have tried to learn to hold my tongue, to let things happen without me being involved or too opinionated, I sympathize with my characters a lot because they live in extreme worlds. For a while, if I did something stupid, I would get some pleasure out of my stupidity by thinking that I needed to have turmoil in my life to have inspiration for my work.

AFH: It’s a common assumption that artists need to suffer in order to produce.

JP: Over time I have been noticing that is not the case, and I am much happier for it.

AFH: Why do you put your characters in such extreme situations?

JP: I often wonder why people do the things that they do. What motivates them to make decisions? Also, what motivates me to make the decisions that I make? Sometimes, the characters’ misery or happiness is mine as well.

AFH: What are your criteria when selecting the materials and fabrics for each character?

JP: At first I would look for materials that looked like something else and would make a character from that. Usually, I would use these for drawings and paintings. Then a few years ago I started looking for materials that fit into what I wanted rather than finding materials that dictated the subject matter. Then, when I started with the sculptures, I would just use old t-shirts or socks. So for a while, that dictated the dimensions of the characters. But more often than not lately, I just look for interesting textures and colors and how these things would work with the applications of pigments. Now it is usually about just plain experimentation. I am mixing different things and seeing how it turns out.

AFH: Are these distinctly different characters, all manifestations of the same character, or a repeated cast of characters?

JP: The characters are often repeated but I think of them differently in each new context. If they show up more than once, then I no longer think of them as being the same.

AFH: Then why re-introduce them? Are they similar creatures of the same species, even if they are not the same individual that was featured in an earlier work?

JP: They are not intended to be part of a running narrative, but sometimes they just show up a few times. Often that happens out of my laziness.

AFH: Do you think art functions similarly for adults as stuffed animals do for children?

JP: If art was free, then I think that it would have a similar effect, but because of the monetary value attached to it the function is different. Maybe it is more like marbles.

AFH: You recently have made your creatures fight wars in a sculpture titled Hopefully, I will live through this with a little bit of dignity. Are their wars related to America’s current situation of being at war?

JP: I thought of Hopefully, I will live through this with a little bit of dignity at first as just a general anti-war piece but the current situation has permeated American life, and divided the country, so much that it is hard to ignore and not reference specifically. When I think of a young person placed in a situation where they have been brainwashed and dehumanized to the extent that they become capable of fighting a war, and dehumanizing the ‘enemy,’ I just can’t imagine that having their humanity under such stress doesn’t change them irreparably. I respect soldiers and think that the role they play is crucial to the defense of a country, but unfortunately the role they are playing in the current situation has nothing to do with the defense of a country, even though that is what they are told. So, in that piece, I create have a situation where young people have been made to do things for false reasons, with violent, tragic results. I want to evoke a visceral reaction in any rational person seeing that work.

AFH: You’re Canadian. Do you feel tied to American politics at all?

JP: It’s funny you ask that. I never voted in Canada but since moving to America, I have wanted to vote, especially given the current government. It has been very frustrating not being able to vote but it seems like the tides are turning. After being lied to by the government here for six years people are wising up. The economy is starting to drop, the dollar is losing strength, the real estate market is softening and as these things happen and people start to feel that pinch; they are becoming aware of what they are being fed by the government and becoming more critical of what the government is doing, or not doing. It is disheartening to me that the Canadian government is becoming like the American government. So I also think I should start voting there too.

AFH: How does Canadian conservatism really compare to conservatism in the States? Prime Minister Stephen Harper seems pretty moderate by American standards.

JP: I get to hear only tidbits of information on Stephen Harper, so if I sound like an expert, I am not. He seems to be the same sort of Christian/family values person as President Bush. The only roadblock he has to his goals is that he has a minority government and if he really started pressing the Conservative values to the same extent Bush has pushed them here, then he would face a vote of ‘no-confidence’ and force an election. That’s the difference with a 49-51 government here. Bush still makes decisions that impact Canada, but when you have a situation like that it is different where the government is moderated by the fact they can be voted out in a special election.

AFH: And as a Canadian, how do you feel about participating in a show called 'USA Today'?

JP: I think that it is fine. I moved to the US to pursue an education in art and I ended up showing in LA and New York professionally before my work was shown in the same capacity in Canada. Therefore, though I was born in Canada, the US is where I feel I was given the opportunity to become a professional artist.

AFH: Are you satisfied with most of the critical response your work receives?

JP: I read things but don't worry about them too much. I also don't think about that aspect of artmaking too much. I don't care for the word 'whimsical', a word often ascribed to my work, but people will say whatever they want. Sometimes I feel people don't get too far past what it looks like -

ie: cute, disheveled, or 'funky,' another description that I don't really care for. These superficial descriptive terms tend to be the focus, and then the text or titles are ignored which in some cases I feel are more important than the actual things themselves.

AFH: Why do you think people want to interpret your work are sweeter, cuter or more banal than it is?

JP: When people see it they often comment on how child-like it is. It has some characteristics of that but I don't really think that it is. Also in some cases the scale and the materials make them look like dolls or Muppets. Again, I don't really think that they look like Muppets but I get it as way to start to understand the sculptures. If that is your point of reference, then it would make sense that there is an immediate inherent cuteness.

AFH: Sure but in many cases the Muppets weren't just cute. They were satires of politics and pretty powerfully expressive of other, more complex emotions beyond cuteness. As Margaret Atwood said, 'Children are only cute to adults. To each other they are life-size.' Why are most adults so keen to patronize children or dismiss child-like expressions of unhappiness or distress?

JP: Perhaps when you are a child you see other children as life size but you see adults and how they treat you as something different. My friend's 3 1/2 year old adamantly claims he is a big kid when you call him a baby or a 'little guy', so it seems that throughout childhood you are always trying to redefine who you are to be more like the adults, and that stays with you. Once you are considered an adult, you still carry that definition with you and subconsciously you have to dismiss anything that is childlike so you don't lose any of the ground you have gained.

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