

JOSEPH HART

STUDIO VISIT 3

IN THE
BROADEST SENSE

BY
MARC VALLI



IN HIS WEBSITE Joseph Hart describes most of his works as 'mixed media', an economical way of describing a complex and free-flowing process involving collaged paper, inks, acrylics, coloured pencils, graphite and the odd blob of paint, which all, surprisingly, almost miraculously, coalesce into a clear and controlled visual language capable of following subtle lines of thought.

When did you first think of becoming a visual artist? It is difficult to pinpoint a specific moment. I come from a creative and arts-oriented family: the arts were encouraged at a very early age, so it has always been an important part of my life. I feel fortunate.

You grew up in New Hampshire. Is that background important to you as an artist? Very much so. I learned my gnarly work ethic in New Hampshire, which is advantageous when I'm in production mode. Having grown up in a small rural town keeps me in check, too. My family still lives there. It's a beautiful country.

And how do you feel now living in New York? New York is the best and worst of everything. I love it and hate it. It makes



Previous page:
Le Radon (Backwards B)
Mixed media on paper
71.1 x 33.9 cm
2009

Opposite:
Heard
Mixed media on paper
182.6 x 121.9 cm
2009

Left:
Rossini's Starlight
Mixed media on paper
101.6 x 76.2 cm
2009

me feel bipolar. Being an artist in NYC can feel cliché, overwhelming and annoying at times but I manage. There is a lot to see and do, and plenty of space to be whomever you choose. My artwork will forever be informed by my experience living here, so in this sense, New York is pretty powerful.

Who were the artists who most inspired you? Early on I liked comic book artists, skateboard graphics and record sleeve art. They were relatively easy to access. As a student, I admired the paintings of Kitaj, Ben Shahn, Hockney and Guston for their narrative qualities and sense of play. These days I'm looking at and thinking about a variety of things: Twombly, Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, Fred Wilson, Norm Abram's craftsmanship, *Nobody's Darling* by Alice Walker, a well-prepared meal, John Stezaker, Miró,

Flowers in a Niche by Jan Van Huysum, Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* and wandering around the Metropolitan Museum of Art, here in New York.

East coast, West coast... You have shown in both, how do they compare? They are different but the same. Or maybe LA is a peacock, SF is a panda and NYC is a rat. I lived in San Francisco for about a year a long time ago. Some of my closest friends live out West.

Your website mentions illustration (as in *Jhartillustration.com*), but you seem to work mainly with art galleries and on self-initiated projects. That's an old domain name I bought while I was an illustration student. My URL has since changed to *joseph-hart.com*. I'm not a web guy, and I haven't had the time to figure out how to drop my old URL, but keep it's ranking status. To be honest, I dislike artist

websites. They serve a purpose, of course, but they are a poor substitute for viewing original artwork.

I consider myself an artist in the broadest sense. Fine art and illustration are related but separate forms. One cannot exist without the other.

And do you feel at ease in the art world? The only time I feel at ease is when I'm spending time with the people I love, swimming in Lake Nubanusit, or working in my studio.

A lot of your pieces are described as 'mixed media', which is a pretty vague term. I do in fact use a variety of media while I'm working: collaged paper, ink, acrylic, coloured pencil and graphite on paper, usually. I use the label 'mixed media' on my website because there isn't enough space to list all my materials. I am most comfortable working on paper. I like how it holds my marks, how I can easily cut it up, fold, rip and destroy it, then build it all back up again. Paper is easy to find, usually affordable and, from my point of view, not as fussy and precious as canvas. Paper also invites intimacy and craftsmanship, which are two things that I greatly appreciate and feel are too often overlooked. There are some references to *Painting buried in the work*: blobs of dried and caked-up paint glued directly onto the surfaces. This overt impasto adds an extra texture, a sort of conversation between two and three dimensions.

Does size matter? Scale matters within the marketplace. Economics and sensationalism are at play here, and business is business. In the studio, I do what makes sense, feels right and good and honest. The scale of my work often changes abruptly. What starts out small usually ends up being big, and vice versa.

Below:
Joy Lopez
Mixed media on paper
48.3 x 38.3 cm
2009



Physical space will obviously dictate decisions having to do with size, too. My studio is relatively small.

What's a typical day in the studio like? A typical day at the studio begins in the morning and ends at dusk. My wife and I just had a baby, so my usual studio schedule is temporarily in flux. I try to run a pared down and organized studio practice, free from too much clutter. Over the years I've found that I'm most productive and relaxed in this setting. I work on a table, or on the wall, and I usually only focus on one piece at a time. I like this sort of dedication and attention. Music is often playing in the background. The

last three records I listened to were Pet Sounds (Beach Boys), 1000 Hurts (Shellac) and Nebraska (Bruce Springsteen). I also listen to the audio tracks from film, or public radio. I do appreciate silence from time to time, too.

Is there a particular methodology in your work? Allowing my work and practice to evolve; shift and breath is absolutely essential for me. This is how I learn and keep things fresh. I'm not interested in becoming one of those artists that repeats themselves over and over. I enjoy figuring out a new approach or a new way of working, taking risks and allowing myself to fuck up.

Below:
Joseph Hart's studio



Do concepts play an important role? Sure. Art is about ideas, isn't it? I currently utilize visits to museums and reproductions from art history books as platforms for examining the politics and economics of display, in institutions and elsewhere, and how value can be suggested through different modes of presentation. Fixtures such as vitrines, shelves, frames, and plinths are reoccurring images in my work, providing formal structure while also serving as symbols of significance. *And the night sky?* At one point I was very interested in the work of Vija Celmins. She makes amazing celestial paintings and drawings among other things. As a

Below:
Out of Abscorts n.2
 Mixed media on paper
 48.3 x 38.1 cm
 2010



sort of exercise, I thought I would try and make one, which turned out to be quite therapeutic and educational for me, and a good lesson in composition, if you can believe it. I haven't made a 'night sky' piece in a few years. I think I'm done with them. How about concepts like 'history' or 'geography'? I think about timelessness, things that have stood the test of time as opposed to fads or trends. I do appreciate the bizarre compositions and aesthetics of maps, though geography is not on my mind much other than thinking about places I would like to travel to. And how about, well, 'nature'? I love being in nature, especially after living in a

Below:
Second Discovery
 Mixed media on paper
 48.3 x 38.1 cm
 2010



filthy city for the past ten years... And 'human nature'? There are definitely decent people out there, but I have to say, the collective nature of humans is pretty disappointing. My wife reminds me to try to be optimistic, so... Human shapes (bodies, heads, torsos) seem to be most frequent figurative elements in your work, and there seems to be something quite sensual in your use of the human figure. Is the relationship between people (and people's bodies) an important subject for you? Figurative elements come and go in my work. Within the context of a museum, I like the relationship between figurative sculpture and the mechanisms

used to display them, some of which I've mentioned already. I see an interesting paradox between the sharp and rigid architecture of display devices, and the organic figurative forms that they support. These observations are a crucial component in my work, along with an emphasis on playing with line, breaking down shape and form, unraveling and exploding things, trying to relax, and not worrying about making masterpieces.

And finally, what do you do for fun? At the risk of sounding sappy, I can cite nothing more exciting these days than spending time with my newborn daughter (Ruba Beacon) and watching her learn to smile ●