

1.

–You were born in Barbados in the Caribbean and your family kept moving to different places like Hawaii and so forth. As a child and teenager you have been exposed to eccentric English –creole, pidgin from different islands–. Your father was also a linguist. Do you picture how these formative years could have been an influential component of your future artwork?

I think many would take exception to having Creole or Pidgin described as “eccentric”. An old adage in linguistic circles states that a language is just a creole or a pidgin with an army and navy. My formative years were extremely influential in my overall development. Firstly, growing up speaking 5 different dialects of English, each more or less incomprehensible to the others, gave me a strong sense of the relative malleability of all meaning. Then there was the ever changing geographies and cultures, and always being somewhat of an outsider. Although I am now considered an American artist, these formative experiences that color my worldview are rather different to the usual American experience, particularly as my parents insisted we always attend local schools, and not ones that catered to the expat and international communities.

2.

–You attend CalArts and profit of the two main figures of mentor/teacher John Baldessari and Michael Asher. Were you in tune with these people? Please tell us your formative school years.

John remains one of my hugest influences. To this day I cannot make an artistic move without the echoes of something he said sloshing around in the back of my brain somewhere. His anarchic spirit, his humor and his playfulness are still everywhere to be found in all the work I have done since. Michael Asher was another story. The school had palpable tribal lines and affiliations, and Asher was the figurehead of what amounted to the other side. Asher veered far to close to ideological purity for my tastes, and there was an uncompromising doctrinaire feel to his message. I gave it a shot, but ultimately that trajectory disagreed with me on a deep molecular level.

3.

–You moved to New York in early 80s. What motivated your decision? The city, some key figures of artists (if so, could you name them), or other ideas?

That was where you went. Simple as that. CalArts was essentially a pipeline into lower Manhattan. The Los Angeles art world was a far less tangible option at that time. It was actually the generation right before my own, a generation that included Mike Kelly and Jim Shaw, that began to seriously change the status of LA as a relevant hub of contemporary art. There were also a couple of other factors, firstly, I was dead keen to get into the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program there, and secondly, after being blown away by Jack Goldstein's now legendary visiting artist stint at CalArts, I approached him and he had been encouraging about my working for him when I got to New York.

4.

*–The eighties became a mythical era nowadays and especially the east village scene:
for art and for music as well. Which side you belong to? The Lower east Side or the Soho one?
And more general, could you give a brief comment on this peculiar New York scene?*

I definitely come out of the East Village scene, but in a rather odd way. The scene was as extraordinarily vibrant as it is often described, there were literally hundreds of tiny galleries mushrooming out of tenements. There was also a sense that it was a cultural battlefield, on one hand the hot and loose expressionist side that obviously included the graffiti artists and now luminaries such as Basquiat, Haring, and Scharf. The other side was the cool, tight, and conceptually based artists who took their primary cues from the Minimalist and Pictures generations. There was a palpable sense of us and them that cut across the Avenues. The sincerity we took those cultural 'wars' with back then all seems a bit laughable now as today I delight in many artists I once considered 'the enemy', and am somewhat nonplussed by others I considered essential 'allies'. But this was the tenor and cadence of the street back then and it gave the moment a clear dynamism.

Now what is ironic is that while I cut my teeth in that early scene, no East Village gallery would actually give me a show till somewhat later. It was only when the more prominent galleries of Soho began to be interested in what was going on that I was singled out as a representative of this new East Village art and featured in exhibitions on that more amplified cultural platform. In both those first cases it was Metro Pictures.

5.

–Your first pieces successfully exhibited in several new galleries and later on at Sonnabend were dealing with labels, boxes, machine-like components... You were associated with the Neo Geo tag. Did you fit in it?

The Neo Geo tag was always a lazy effort on the part of journalists. I believe it might have been Jeffrey Deitch who first humorously coined the moniker. I personally detested it as it oversimplified things to place them in opposing contrast to Neo-Expressionism. The term also placed certain Baudrillardian derived ideas in an overemphasized position of primacy. I always felt more comfortable with the less dramatic, but ultimately far more controversial term, ‘Commodity Art’. That term shifted the whole understanding of my approach.

6.

*–Machinery, survival kits, cables in tension, logos. Any sexual connotations (S&M)?
Or Judd's meets pin ball game meets pop art meets luxury hotels tags on cabin trunk...?*

I think it's as simple as my lifelong infatuation with hyperbole and slippery contradictory meanings. When language itself is seen as utterly malleable, and then you realize that literally everything is language, well, you're in interesting territory. From very early on I had felt frustrated by contemporary art's general inability to speak. Much as I love the work of both Rothko and Still, I could not help but feel that such work was shackled and unable to address the wild range of real world experiences and events. In a sense, these artists had become servants to the perpetually nuanced logofication of a brand.

7.

–You participated to the legendary show at Sonnabend the Hot Four in 1986 with Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, Meyer Vaisman. Was it crossing the boundary between East Village and Soho, between experimental and established?

Well it was certainly the show that put the East Village scene on the larger cultural map. It was all incredibly intricate and political. Several major Soho galleries had been vying to mount this show, each with a slightly different cast of characters. It turned out that Jeff Koons and I were the only two on the roster of all the various incarnations. Meyer Vaisman, who ran the then ultra hot and protean International With Monument Gallery turned out to be a natural negotiator, so I (and I believed some of the key others) delegated much of the negotiating to him. It was a very big decision. Of course he naturally picked a gallery that wanted to mount an exhibition that included his own work, but I was happy with that as I liked his work, and his choice of venue, Sonnabend, was ultimately my choice.

8.

–Your decision to leave New York for Bali in 1993 sounded like a "Gauguinazation".

Was it a surfer's wish, a desire to escape from something, a conscious solution to refigure your expressionist hidden side in a kitschy colorful country? Why Bali?

It was quite simple really. The cold U.S. northeast is not my natural habitat, I made a good run of it and learned an awful lot, but when the ride we had been on came to a precipitous end in the early 90's, I saw no reason to stick around. It can be a very fickle town and there were things I wanted to do. Hanging around openings there like some unwanted ghost hoping to catch a whiff of former glories was not an option I cared to consider. I had grown up on islands across the tropics and needed to see how all the lessons I had learned in the hard scrabble and airy heights of New York might translate into a more biologically agreeable environment. I honestly never thought of Gauguin until others continually bought it up, then it became the elephant in the room that I knew I would have to confront sooner or later. The truth is that the first exhibition of figurative work that I made in Bali was dreamed up almost in its entirety in New York before I left. I needed to go somewhere far enough and quiet enough in order to find the kind of concentrated time I needed to make that stuff.

9.

–Since you settled to Bali, your work reconciliates with painting, tridimensionality, colors, assemblages and compositions. One talked about a "tropical surrealism", how would you define (if necessary?) the multifaceted works you produced since then?

From the very beginning I feel that I have been a parodist. The box like work I made in the 80's were in every sense a parody of what a painting is, as a thing, and in all the stations and manifestations of its existence. What I did years later in Bali was essentially the same thing. I was not making images as such, but instead, 'things' that were 'paintings'. They intentionally manifest the standardized factors a painting might have; color, exoticism, sexuality, and some allusion of narrative, and all this poured through the proscenium arch of an absurdly bombastic frame. I have always thought these works were the strange inverted siblings of Allan McCollum's intentionally mute 'Surrogates'.

10.

–mixing grotesque figures with crafted frames and inlays, photoshopped images assembled in huge composition. Could you tell us a word about your formal strategies and composition processes?

In order to make these 'painting things' in the manner they needed to be done, I had to employ a variety of methods. This was actually a plus as I detest painting, photography and sculpture in equal measure, but amusingly find great succor in the admixture of the three. While I love all three in the work of others, in my own work, painting alone always felt to cartoony, photography alone too clinical, and sculpture just plain presumptuous. Besides, I have never been happy with something being what it is supposed to be and offering up a clear homogenous meaning. Things needed to be many things at once, even, no especially, contradictory things. Art objects needed to be moving targets, never resting for scrutiny on any laboratory table.

11.

–thematically speaking, the human figures –young local bathing beauties vs aged overweighted mean (deformed sometimes) are of your concern. Is it another "Gauguinazation" with ecological and survivalist position?

When it came time to deal with that elephant in the room, I decided, OK, so people keep talking about Gauguin, well then, I'll give you Gauguin, all of it, and at full throttle in all its syphilitic wonder. Ideas of expatriate life, with all its presumptions about race, culture, gender, and sexuality are all subjects I am quite familiar with, so I decided to go to go to town on it all. I dreamed up the blue man character as some sort of escapee from the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries with all its archetypes and assumptions, but now suddenly adrift in an alien 21st century. In his Picasso shirt, with his hair styled and braided into a cartoon of a desert island, he was the perverse embodiment of the classical existential antihero. In every sense I was trying to insert Gauguin onto his own paintings.

12.

–the new "wall-wall" assemblages of day-glo painted stones are reenacting the previous 80s ones. how did you come to that idea? And by extension do you have any similar plan for other earlier works?

I think I got to a point where I was no longer running. It seemed like time to look at the odd bifurcated nature of my career and try to chart an unbroken arc through it all. I did have many discussions on the subject, with some people saying to return to older themes would be to dilute them, but what turned me was a discussion with Damien Hirst where he said, "It's your language, you can do what you want with it!" I liked that. It was also at a time where he had shipped over some old Wall-Wall works from the 80's that he had been sitting on and were in need of some serious repair. It was while working on these that I realized I was not finished with this work, not by a long shot. I could see in them the route by which I could draw everything full circle.

13.

–The principle of Newport Street gallery is based on gathering and collecting generous numbers of works of an artist before making the exhibition. Do you think what Damian Hirst is doing is an alternative strategy to museum's? No fear to capture a too large number of items and make them out of normal art market?

That may be the outcome, but it's certainly not the motivation. After knowing him and watching him operate for years, I believe that it is purely an insane compulsion to possess what he loves. This is not a

negotiable obsession that can be placated with half measures and treaties; this is a deep singularly focused love that needs to be followed through to its conclusion no matter what. It is these characteristics that have made doing the show with him at Newport Street so exhilarating. I have likened it to dizzying breathless tango with a madman.

14.

–Do you picture yourself as a balinese community member concerned with local policy (corruption, rise of fundamentalist Islam, ecological chaos to come...)?

You involved with yogyakarta art lab (YAL) to produce your works but is this also a way to get involve with the "local art scene" to bring it at an international level?

While I have a deep love for the people and culture of Bali, and my wife is Balinese, I do not consider myself either Balinese or Indonesian. I do however consider myself Asianized, in that I feel completely at home in this part of the world.

Indonesia, like the U.S., has a rich and vibrant culture that covers a far darker underbelly. Certain things that are unblinkingly accepted in the U.S. often appear barbaric to me, and the opposite is true for Indonesia too. Belonging to no one place gives you a certain flexibility. It's similar to getting used to driving on both the left and the right side of the road, it takes a bit of acclimation, but after a while, both seem normal.

While in the last several years I have had a much clearer presence in the art scene of S.E.Asia, for the first part of my quarter century here I was happy to just fall off the map completely and work in relative isolation. To your question, the Indonesian art world certainly didn't need my participation to help it to an international level; this place is an incandescent powerhouse of vision and talent. The Jogja scene was founded out of the efforts of such figures as Affandi and Hendra Gunawan, both of whom easily compare to their contemporaries in the west.

15.

–No plan to come back to western world?

There is always a vague plan, but it never seems to materialize. I would actually like to be completely international in both my exhibiting as well as my production, basing myself loosely in S.E. Asia as well as the U.S. west coast. Here in Bali we are fortunate to have a relatively constant stream of serious creative types come through. This year, to my delight, Gabriel Orozco showed up with plans to make it a three-year stay. He truly does represent a completely international model and as such is a current inspiration.

16.

– Is surfing a daily job for you? The surf (sub)culture –music, clothing, tatoos... is a component in your work?

Well, compared to my surfing compatriots here in Bali, I surf relatively seldom. While they are out daily, I consider myself lucky if I get 2 sessions in in a week. I am an artist long before I am a surfer, but both cut deep to the marrow. I don't live much in surf culture here outside the actual act of riding waves, indeed, on the rare occasions that I do venture out of my home/studio complex other than to surf, it is most likely for some type of art event.

As for my relationship with the larger surf culture, I have followed it at a measured distance for a lifetime. It's known that what is probably my most well known work, the self-portrait with logos in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, comes directly out of my observations of surf culture. While only being tangentially involved in the thick of it all, it has been a sort of private cultural laboratory for decades, an observable microcosm and filter if you want.