

LABROSSE

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ARTIST STATEMENT

“Art is the distance that time gives to suffering.”

Albert Camus, notebooks 1955

My work is essentially gestural, vitalist action-painting, executed at the confluence of Fine Arts, alchemy and the rough, cool detachment of the industrial world. It is constructed in a state where contrasts meet and clash. On a technical level, my welding apprenticeship followed by years of aimless roaming through heavy industries, building sites, ports, shipyards and foundries, led me to recognize metal as the appropriate medium for what I want to express.

Fascination with the distorted human body is primordial to my art, resounding the catastrophic events of Minamata with its indirect repercussions on Butoh, the mummies of the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo, the five-thousand-year-old Iceman, and more recently, the apocalyptic appearance of Rick Genest’s entirely tattooed body as he represents himself as both art and skeleton. It brings to mind Goya, Bacon’s fascination with teratology, Dubuffet and the CoBrA movement, Basquiat, Freud and so many other artists who have tried to push the human body’s envelope without completely losing perspective of its humanity.

In my early twenties, I had the great privilege of meeting Kazuo Ohno, one of the founder/dancers of the Butoh cultural movement. He performed privately for me—his body literally inches away from mine—bringing a profound and decisive epiphany to my artistic quest. During his troubling and exquisite performance of *La Argentina*, this one-on-one connection, provoked in me a deep emotional shock—an awakening. As a small child, I had watched a black and white documentary on the discovery of World War II death camps. The forgotten and intense sensations of stupefaction, malaise, angst, fright and confusion left by the now famously iconic images of the self-destruction of the human race instantly resurfaced to my conscious mind with Ohno’s surreal presence, making Butoh a sort of anchorage, an inspiration, a connection to long lost images burrowed and tucked away in my memory. Butoh, and its elements of Noh and Kabuki, itself inspired by film noir, Antonin Artaud, Marquis de Sade, Jean Genet and Mishima’s writings, and inspired by German Expressionism and the Neue Tanze movement, were to become subtext influences in my work, like telluric currents, unseen but subconsciously felt.

I would spend a lifetime armed with draftsmanship and skills gleaned through different studies, techniques and practices as varied as lithography, printmaking, filmmaking and photography, trying to visually communicate the repressed feelings of a child

questioning the madness of men, let alone process such violent images. In a nutshell, I was looking for a way to overcome the distance between the painter and a wounded body, and between a wounded body and the universe.

The result is a visual dream within a dream, or more aptly, a nightmare within a nightmare—an artistic enigma, where an emotional body swims back from the unconscious to the conscious mind, to finally resurface and breathe. With as little interference as possible, I try to save it from a virtual drowning—for an instant. I have narrowed down to the bare essentials, precisely what is necessary to substantiate it. I am not interested in the explicit: decor, perspective, narrative, face definition, or even the very choice of the colours—primarily because of the rarity of the pigment available at the moment of creation.

Descriptive time has been erased to make an archetypal, feverish, human form incarnate, to continue its magnificent, endangered reign, frontierless. By eliminating the figure/background dialectic, I take a step back to an Abstract Expressionists' time where evocation gave the viewer space to win over the specific.

MEDIUM

DS: Can you conceive of getting to a stage where you had such freedom in your handling of the brush that it became unnecessary to interrupt the process with other practices?

FB: But I use those other practices just to disrupt it. I'm always trying to disrupt it. Half my painting activity is disrupting what I can do with ease. I want a very ordered image, but I want it to come by chance.

From "Interviews with Francis Bacon"

David Sylvester, Thames and Hudson 1962-1979

"Drawing is faster than painting, perhaps the only medium as fast as the mind itself."

Robert Motherwell, 1966

It is through the classical medium of oils and acrylics that I first tried to paint, with limited success. For a decade I produced infructuous paintings—all were destroyed but a few. The oils, and even the acrylics couldn't dry quick enough to salvage a soul. The process had to be more immediate, almost in direct synchronicity with my emotions, that which drawings and quick sketches can sometimes render. Though painstaking, lithography gave me hope that I would eventually be able to abandon myself to increasingly less explicative gestures while still maintaining precision from the inside. The spirit of the stone was felt and explored with results uncannily, in the Freudian sense, resembling my present work. Its palimpsest effect gave me a glimpse into what I could achieve if I had the proper medium. I would eventually be able to reveal part of a somatic, psychoanalytical inner Codex. I was on a lead, blindfolded.

Years of research and experimentation were devoted to reach this goal. I had to develop a very unique and specific medium. It had to be agile, subtle and evanescent enough to evoke and translate the receding and concealed ethereal images seen by the soul, by the mind's eye, almost instantly. This medium would have to be able to defy

and destabilize any pre-conceptions or ideas. It would have mediumistic qualities itself that could foresee the artist's obsession and childhood engrams. This search for an iconoclastic medium that could convey and express darkness and decay, led to industrial electrostatic paint. It could, in its essence and process, in its unicity, echo the deafening meander of the inner chaos of an alienated industrialized world, while simultaneously respecting the limitations of its plane as an art form. Once revealed and tamed, the quest became to discover how this medium could be converted into an expressive tool. And once it was, a real 'alchemy' was stirred and has thrived.

The pigments I use are as fine as talc, more like an independent pixel that won't blend to produce another colour. Loose and free from any binding agent, it feels much like a multitude of cells in an ethereal state waiting for a breath, or a signal to multiply, and manifest itself. An electromagnetic field and the strength of my spirit conjointly hold the pigment on the plane. The constant vibrations of the mechanical room disturb, weaken and constantly shatter and alter my work-in-progress and I have to let go of any hope of controlling what I do. Lost in the process, I work in tune with all sensory perceptions, in a cybernetic loop, a reverbed autopoiesis, where bodies are formed. Golems appear, pending between virtual and actual, in limbo. In the absence of any binding agent, the pigments reveal their truths in the heat; they are cured at a high temperature in an overpowering, gargantuan oven. Only then do the images finally set on the metal surface. Only then can the souls return to breathe. From their ashes they travel to a place where they can finally be seen and recognized.

PROCESS

"I sing the body electric", Walt Whitman, *Leaves of grass*, 1855

"My opinion is that we need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any past culture. Each age finds its own technique...Most of the paint I use is a liquid, flowing kind of paint. The brushes I use are used more as sticks rather than brushes – the brush doesn't touch the surface of the canvas, it's just above."

Jackson Pollock, New York, 1950

In the early Thirties, new media such as alkyd, polyvinyl acetates, polymers, nitro-cellulose, synthetic paints and resin-like acrylic emulsions became easily available. The ways in which artists applied and managed these agents were crucial to the development of twentieth century art. Industrial paint flowed onto canvasses, boards and masonite, letting abstract expressionists and pop and op artists to go furiously faster in an exploding creative world. The use of masking tape gave birth to hard edges; colour fields existed by themselves like new, unexplored lands. Palette knives held their own, creating planes and moonscapes. Serigraphy and photography served Warhol well. Simultaneously, Frank Stella started using aluminum as a support. It is in an extension of this Abstract Expressionist tradition, in search of an even more

contemporarily potent medium, that I found industrial electrostatic paint, or also known as powder-coating, a direct and perfect outlet for my *innerscapes*.

The process I use is fairly simple, although it is practiced in a hostile and relatively inaccessible environment. In the moment of creation, I dress, blend and become a layman with no specific identity, an industrious factory worker in an estranged world. On an electrically charged aluminum sheet, equipped with a spray gun in each hand—usually charged with two different colours—an air gun hanging from my shoulder, which I use to add or remove superfluous pigment, and a paraphernalia of sticks, ropes, steel brushes and rags, I am ready to paint. This particular use of aluminium as a support is not, by all means, an end in itself, artificial or seductive but intrinsic to my practice. I work on a production line away from the comfort and *rêverie* of the atelier.

The space I work in, with its stainless steel walls and floors, resembles a clinic or a laboratory more than a studio. There is no solitude, no intimacy, no privacy. There is no trace of me there, no images, no references, no visuals or guides to rhyme with what I want to create. It is all in my mind, eye and heart. The factory's ambient noise is deafening, and sounds like David Lynch's *Eraserhead* soundtrack or Thor's or Dante's imaginary thundering foundries. Acetone, rust and dust burn my eyes. Because I can't breathe properly, the fogged visor greatly reduces my visibility. I hyperventilate from being so enclosed. Summer heat is suffocating, alienating. The expense of leasing factory time urges me to act quickly, and precariously, and could be compared somewhat to working on a fresco: I sometimes get only one take. I truly work under constraint, and it is this very fact that brings me to a state of quasi-amnesia. Thoughts, ruminations, trial and error are simply forbidden. There is a live deconstruction of skills that takes me into a necessary trance. A transmutation occurs. I am one with the medium, paradoxically uninhibited.

This detachment leads to a distilled self that can feel a presence, an entity that can only unfold in that very moment, in a painting.

Labrosse
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