

WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Selected Press on Chad Robertson

CHAD ROBERTSON
April 25-May 23, 2009, at [Western Project](#), Culver City
by Diane Calder

When Louis Daguerre was awarded the patent for a process that mechanically captured and fixed images in a manner many thought of as perfectly objective, but without artistic merit, painters feared being put out of work by anyone who could cock a camera shutter. Since that time, photographers and painters have fought over and invaded each other's territory, made concessions, crossed margins and (frequently) benefited from learning to get along.

In the years that have passed since photographers first realized they could elevate clients above the mundane by posing them in front of painted backdrops, interest in work by artists who, like Chad Robertson, dislodge medium specificity from their creations has grown. Robertson utilizes technical acumen gained while working as a freelance designer of movie posters. He maintains a photographic edge in his new paintings using Photoshop as a tool in service of his painterly skills.

Robertson gained critical acclaim several years ago mining downloaded gestures from videotape interviews in search of the "moments between moments" in peoples' lives. A provocative sense of melancholy engulfed those paintings on paper, reinforced by the empty spaces isolating each figure and Robertson's preference for restrained monochromatic palettes and unvarnished finishes.

With his new work, Robertson continues to fine-tune his method of production in service of larger, more colorful, complex and assured oil paintings on canvas. Elements in his "Mash Up" series, named after the phenomenon of layering popular, sometimes disparate songs to create something new, are arranged in Photoshop. The artist begins with images that command attention, often his own photographs or those culled from mass media sources. Positioning promising material in separate digital layers, Robertson is free to experiment with weaving elements of his composition together seamlessly, adjusting volume, tenor and tone by changing the size, position, opacity, color, etc. of various components. Once Robertson is satisfied with the orchestration, he references his printouts, perfecting their translation to oil paint on canvas.



"Mash-Up #5," 2007,
oil on paper, 17 x 45".



"Mash-Up #6," 2007,
oil on paper, 30 x 24".



"Mash-Up #10," 2008,
oil on canvas over panel, 37 x 48".



"Mash-Up #11," 2008,
oil on canvas, 48 x 60".

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Robertson, whose constant studio companion is his iPod, crosses media boundaries by envisioning the narrative of his paintings as music. Citing Brian Eno as an influence, Robertson perceives parallels between assembling visual elements and combining musical notes. He addresses this collection of paintings as a medley of works that present non-specific pieces of music as a visual experience. They are in the artist's words, ". . . much like a collection of individual songs sharing a larger narrative, like an album or full-length CD. And like a familiar song that takes on profound new meaning at different phases of life, or in the light of experience, each of these paintings sings out like a single that tells its own distinct story to whomever is listening, or seeing."

Rather than assigning descriptive titles to the paintings in his "Mash Up" series, Robertson numbers them, coaxing viewers to trust their own interpretations of each work. It's difficult however, to avoid speculating about the artist's personal history, especially when paying attention to the cinematic imagery replete in his paintings.

Robertson currently resides in the hills near the Hollywood sign, where fantasy period architecture abuts restored modernist homes in juxtapositions as unpredictable as that of the imagery in his paintings. The iconic Hollywood sign noses in for its close-up in "Mash Up #12," albeit not from its best side.

Las Vegas, another town where architecture lite brings the place to the people, was his home for several years. That desert town's lavish use of water, in fountains, pools and man made canals, is as unanticipated as Robertson's flood of waves inside the car seen in profile in "Mash Up #11." He owns an underwater camera and confesses to feeling most at ease when free floating in water.

Robertson grew up in an Orange County community neighboring Disneyland. Years later, when traveling abroad, sites in cities like Venice seemed less authentic to him than architecture from the magic kingdom he had bonded with as a child. Fireworks bursting from a Disney Fantasyland sky reiterate the radiating cracks in a pane of glass shattered by a rugged, wood-handled hammer in the dramatic, almost operatic "Mash Up # 16." Its marvelous textural nuances, lost in downsized photographic reproductions, sing out when experienced firsthand.

Artistry in altering photographs

Most critics write, it's fair to presume, in hopes of stimulating a wider conversation. But the act can feel more like speaking to a two-way mirror. It's rare that the conversation, if initiated, circles back to the critic.

Curators York Chang and Karyl Newman make a commendable effort to close that circuit with "Dear Mr. Saltz," a stimulating group show conceived as a response to a 2004 article by Jerry Saltz, then writing for the Village Voice (and now with New York magazine). In the article, titled "The Richter Resolution," Saltz complained of a glut of unoriginal photo-based painting and, "in defense of the staggeringly radical act of really looking," proposed "a 48-month moratorium on the reproduction of photographs via overhead, opaque, or slide projectors in painting (this means tracing too)."

Inspired by the discussions this article apparently generated in their circles, Chang and Newman invited eight photo-based painters to mount a defense. Each contributes several works and a letter addressed to Saltz.

Few of the artists veer radically from the Warhol/Richter/Celmins paradigm that Saltz decries, but none appears to be blindly imitating.

Julie Brown-Smith, Ed Johnson, Greg Santos and Holly Williams-Brock reproduce photographic scenes directly, with an emphasis on the iconic nature of the imagery or on such surface



Pharmaka

'REFLECTION': Douglas C. Bloom plays with shape, flatness and texture.

qualities as glare and blur. **Allison Cortson** also paints from photographs but incorporates dust collected from the homes of her subjects, which creates a far different effect.

Chad Robertson overlays images taken from sequential frames of a video to create multi-dimensional studies of expression and gesture. **Tyler Stallings** makes hyper-realistic paintings of his own unsettlingly grotesque photographic collages. **Douglas**

C. Bloom flirts with abstraction in landscapes, playing with flatness, shape and texture.

The letters, most of which are touchingly earnest, agree with Saltz on his one overarching argument: Unoriginal, mechanical, clone-ish painting is bad; original, engaged, passionate painting is good.

And if Saltz's polemic was simply a plea for the kind of serious, honest, rigorous looking that feeds good painting, that is what these artists are doing — they just happen to be looking at photographs.

Pharmaka, 101 W. 5th St., Los Angeles, (213) 689-7799, through June 30. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.pharmaka-art.org.

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★ in other works

ART+PHOTOS+MUSIC

Clockwise from right: Jason, Damien, Jessie, no. 2 by artist Chad Robertson; the artist and Jason Lee flank another one of Robertson's works; Lee has his hands on the real thing.



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Jason Lee finds it amusing at times to refer to himself as "J-Lee", followed by a horror film-type "HOO-HA-HA", all the while explaining his latest undertakings in the worlds of art, photography, skateboarding, and film. Lee doesn't take himself too seriously, but it's hard for others not to do so.

In the late 80's, when Lee was an 18-year-old "amateur" skateboarder touring Sweden, he got his first taste of classic culture in the forms of museums and prominent architecture—a far cry from the "mac-and-cheese land" and "Brady Bunch-ville" he so fondly recalls from his youth. Since then, he's gone from pro skater to acting in such modern classics as *Chasing Amy* and *Almost Famous* to taking on such new roles as art collector, photographer, and writer-producer, not to mention the re-launch of Stereo with fellow skater Chris Pastras.

Stereo, which started in '92, broke from tradition by using still photography and jazz scores in their Super 8 videos at a time when the skate scene was divided between strictly hip-hop and strictly punk and all skate films were poorly shot. They looked like silent Chaplin films more than skateboarding videos, except for the bad-ass street tricks. (Lee is responsible for popularizing the 360 kick-flip.)

As for his growing passion for art, Lee leased a loft downtown to house his expanding art collection, which began with friend Bryten Goss' Shiele-like nudes and pieces from painters Gottfried Helnwein

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jason on art

when not on movie sets, New Hollywood pursues other creative endeavors, including skateboarding

ingenue

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in other works

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and Arthur Hubbard. Today, friends, collectors, and celebrities all trek downtown for various Lee-hosted exhibitions.

In fact, Lee recently threw a party for painter Chad Robertson, and within a week, several of the paintings were sold to the likes of Beck, actor Danny Masterson, and pro-skater Eric Kosten. Robertson's next showcase, a benefit, features paintings inspired by the West Memphis 3 and will include donated works by Henry Rollins, Raymond Pettibon, X's Exene, Dead Kennedy's Jello Biafra, and Obey's Shepard Fairey (for more info, visit www.chadrobertson.com).

Meanwhile, Lee plans to find another building downtown for his new production company, Niva Films, which will release features (including a script he's been writing for 12 years) and a series of artist-documentaries on DVD. There will also be a public gallery and maybe a small skate park.

"Something with a cooler vibe," says Lee. "Not for the sake of being interesting or part of a scene or a scenester. Not pretentious. Not political. Taking it out of the tight-knit smug art scene and bringing it more onto a mainstream level."

—Ilaria Loren

Ingenue, October 2003