

Nikki Darling, "JPW3: The Alchemy of New School Pop Art," *KCET Artbound* online, June 9, 2014



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Nikki Darling



Patrick Walsh, the artist otherwise known as JPW3, looks like he should be in a cologne ad or modeling Speedos. He's the kind of good looking that makes you check your breath or admire your shoelaces when he glances your way. All long limbs, dark hair, dark eyes, scruff and symmetrical angles. Then he opens his mouth. What emerges is a mellow, good-natured, sensitive dude. The kind of dude that vocalizes apprehension about walking through the community mural garden of a nearby housing project, happily accepts a purple button that reads "Capitalism is Fucking the Queer Out of Us," and pins it to his shirt, admits that he first wanted to be a writer, and still writes, and offers to buy a reporter lunch, because he is generous and polite. A bit like a high school guidance counselor hoping to meet you at your level. His musings are soft-spoken, goofy and uniquely elaborate, all the while still sounding off the cuff. Much like his art. But that's where Walsh the Sweet Dude and Walsh the Artist, break. "One major misconception about the work is that because I seem easygoing, the process is less thought out."

That work is expansive. It dips into the interdisciplinary and rotates around many imagistic themes. Some of his conceptually reoccurring symbols: Tuning forks, car engines, popcorn, stove burners, wax, wheels or doorways. Although his performance pieces, paintings, and sculptures take different outlets there is a consistency of vision, which keeps them theoretically in sync.

Walsh's studio resembles a calamitous auto repair shop run by a surrealist philosopher. It's a cavernous two-room mess of toxic chemicals. Popcorn (in all its various stages), wax

drippings, auto parts, tiny Bali Shag rollers and strange literary and zine ephemera, cling to every surface and crunch beneath the feet.

Raised in rural Pennsylvania on his grandfather's land, Walsh spent much of his early childhood in nature. "There were ponds and I could run around and jump on rocks. I grew up around trees but always wanted to be in the city. My friends went to a way better school than I did in Scranton, an art high school. I was a country guy but I hung with the dudes in town. The skater guys, they were my homies."

Echoes of Walsh's time in nature still permeate small sections of the work and can be seen in the conceptual details. "I think wax is this amazing recording material. It can capture sound, whatever detail you can think of, it's a great recording device. Sediment, build up of rock, the time these layers take." He says, looking at one of eventually five towering doorways made of layers of rainbow wax. Even the colored buildup is reminiscent of a tree ring. "This one's a Sawtooth Wave, like a sound wave. Eventually I want them all in a row, so you can visualize a soundwave, one channel on a sound program, something like that."

Like other oddball, creative or not-quite-jock, young men of his generation, Walsh turned to skateboarding as a hobby and outlet. In the process discovering what is for many teenagers, their first introduction to challenging modes of convention and public space and repurposing existing structures for new meaning. It is through these fellow skate friends that he was first introduced to the world of art.

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"I went to Keystone College first, in Pennsylvania and got an associates degree. It was really small but really great. It was rigorous in this way that wasn't conceptual. I did this wood piece that I got really obsessed with, sort of OCD and then I realized I didn't want to decide what to do. I wanted to be interdisciplinary and that led me to the Art Institute of Chicago and there I did video and some sculpture and everything just sort of came together."

During the walk through the mural garden, Walsh happens upon a large work illustrating the twelve signs of the zodiac and reveals that he is a Leo, but isn't sure what that means. What it means, astrologically at least is that Walsh is not a man of happenstance. There is the sense of being in the company of a contented lion, someone who has worked hard and with diligence, to get where he is today, perched on the brink of something big. This year and half alone, he has co-curated the group show, "Culm," at Night Gallery with friend and sometime collaborator, artist Sayer Gomez, participated in the group show "t,o,u,c,h,i,n,g" at Robert Blumenthal gallery in New York, a solo exhibition, "Solid Single Burner" at Michael Jon Gallery in Miami, Z2 again with Gomez, at Samuel Freeman, "SumpPump," with Ryan Foerster at David Petersen Gallery in Minneapolis, the Inaugural Group Show at Loudhailer, the group show "Nackt Glaubigen," at Infernoesque in Berlin, "IT-THOU" at Micheal Thibault Gallery. And of course an upcoming solo show at Night Gallery, where he is now also on the roster.

Nothing happening to Patrick Walsh at this stage of his career is happening by accident. Being driven is something that becomes apparent as he talks about his process and work, interweaving narrative themes within the pieces that he's been toying with for years and are now coming to fruition.

There is a psychic order to the studio, one that isn't obvious to the visitor eye. As Walsh ambles about his debris, grabbing things from small hidden pockets, it becomes clear that he knows where everything is. It's this inner compass through the mess of his studio and the art world that serves him well, an ease of self that inspires confidence. In a 2013 interview with writer, Yanhan Huang for the site "Do Easy Art," Walsh, when asked about the difference between working in New York and L.A., hints at this drive, "In L.A., the whole city feels stuck in molasses. There's no choice but to get into it and work on your patience. Staying out until 4 am isn't an option because everyone thinks you're crazy if you do and every bar closes at 1:30. NYC runs on high-functioning alcoholics and drug addicts while L.A. runs on spas and champagne. The downside is I feel like young artists in L.A. don't have the same amount of exposure or access to the incredible rush of the intravenous drip of art that you find in New York."

The mechanical has long been a favorite of the abstract. Engines, parts, systems of order have all come undone beneath the microscope of art, a utopian investigation into a Fritz Lang nightmare or dreamscape, depending who you ask. But for Walsh, this dilemma is more exciting than the work it produces. Cars are fascinating but the point where

the ethereal meets the mechanical is what flips the switch, so to speak, in the work itself. Popcorn, for instance, is something that has a moment of ignition, a place of transformation brought on by heat and pressure. Its the philosophy behind that moment that is affixed to the work, not so much the popcorn itself, even as it stands in as philosophical metaphor.

As a performance artist Walsh has often-delved into sound pieces revolving around a metaphysical movement through time brought on by a song-sense memory, or through literal time, as he pushes a wheel around the interior of a cave, evoking the hollow bell of what sounds like a child's toy. Think Futurism as a Carpenters song, beauty in the detritus, or rainbows in an oil-spill. Oil, always a remaining element, is one of both separation and saturation, a source of wealth and death, excess and greed. First, however, it was the property of invention. That is the symbolic oil Walsh uses, and much like the popcorn, the pieces reflect this philosophical enthusiasm. Walsh's art straddles the inventor's narrative, the old-fashioned tinkerer, but also the stargazer and existential ponderer, the cosmos as a place of fascination, a source of explosion and power.

The work's most obvious aesthetic influence is German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer, whose mixture of rough materials created a multi-textual study of layering and helped usher in the New Symbolism, which Walsh, as a collector of mediated ephemera also falls in line with. "The popcorn came along with my interest in sound and performance. Also, in relationship to the car there is the relative scale of objects. A piece of popcorn is a performative sculpture, like a car is. One piece of popcorn is one spark, one original shape." At USC, where he received his MFA in 2012, "I put popcorn into this old hat," he says, motioning to a brown fedora, "and each piece, was its own shape, its own thought."

In the works, "RP SWAP" and "R Charm," Kiefer's stamp is especially present. "SWAP's" landscape is both celestial and automotive. Displaying a textured ominous palette of browns, purples and rust, a soft assuagement of tempered colors against chaotic strokes. The tools implemented to create these diversions have left visible residue on the canvas, articulating the process of labor. "R Charm's" surface, although similar, carries many of Walsh's repeating symbols: racing stripes and oven burners. Creating the effect that the work itself might have been burned and bubbled upon, driven on or thrashed. Working out a process of creation is another point of contextuality for Walsh, the process of making and its residue on the work.

"I've been using these panels," he says, pointing to wooden planks leaned against the wall, rainbow colored wax thick on their surfaces, "to make these wax wheels and then I was thinking, I really like these things, I like them here, what they say or might mean. So now I've been thinking about displaying them. I think in relationship to my work, sculptures have been leading into performance and performance has been leading into sculpture in different ways, and then it becomes a painting." Having started in video and performance work, Walsh's need or desire to 'work things out' and the fluidity with how that happens is

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one of the ties that keep the pieces speaking across genre and form, creating this overlap of narrative.

"Maybe because of skateboarding I'm always interested in how things move and it's not a competition," he says, speaking to his work and interest in cars and what it is referred to by observers and participants as "Arab Drifting," an activity in which a car is driven at top speed into a curve then over-steered in order to correct itself, "it's just the adaptability, but also the pure physical enjoyment of doing something that interests me."

Symbols, achievement, and success also play a role in Walsh's work. A boyhood preoccupation with manhood projected against echoes of a Jasper John's first-wave, Warhol 1960's aesthetic. As well, there are bits of Walsh's other early influences peeking from within -- a touch of Basqiat, a sprinkle of Pollack. The artists referenced by Walsh are all individuals who broke form from an existing artistic moment and helped forge a new era. Walsh's work very deliberately seems to toy with the edges of artistic and philosophical rebirth.

There is something both comforting about Walsh's work to anyone who has spent time in museums discovering pop art. The moment formalism was replaced by conceptualism the rules as a viewer were turned upside down. Staring for instance at Jasper John's "Flag" at the Met, one wondered what new and exciting things the world of culture had to offer. It's this feeling that the work strikes to invoke, a new sense of wonder. It's as if Walsh references each moment the pop world transformed, bringing them together on his own terms, mapping a twenty-first century crash course in radical moments of conceptual rupture. The moment the kernel alchemizes into something new.

In an untitled piece which was shown at Loudhailer gallery in their inaugural show, nature and the ethereal call reclusively from the background of what appears to be a stove burner, purple and blue stains curling as the eye turns lazy, wandering its moon like surface. Shapes made using small smudges and scrapes create tiny Rorschach portraits of curiosity.

There is a hunger for meaning in the abstract, a beginner's enthusiasm for knowing and creating that leap from the canvas, a young man's entryway to self expression contained within an acknowledgment and burial of the failed. Like visiting Disneyland's Tomorrowland today, and witnessing the 1960's optimistic view of the future and mourning its lack of fruition.

Pushed against our current consumerist and patriarchal hegemony, in their exact familiarity there is also a melancholic sadness, a youthful spontaneity, a brief window in life, and now history, to remember an aperture of hope and eulogize our belief that there ever was any. And yet, Walsh's referential spattering of different ruptures in art history, work as a continuous reminder that hope for transformation, never goes out, it only lays dormant, waiting for something or someone, to ignite it.

Speaking to Huang, in the "Do Easy Art" interview, Walsh speaks to this lust of invention. This grown man's lament for a youthful desire to see what the world has to offer. "Progress needs vibration. In my view, silence is a place where sound can start. That's how the universe started: it was really quiet... then, bang!"