

An Interview: Jason Shawn Alexander Solo & Sloan Schaffer "No Good At Exits"

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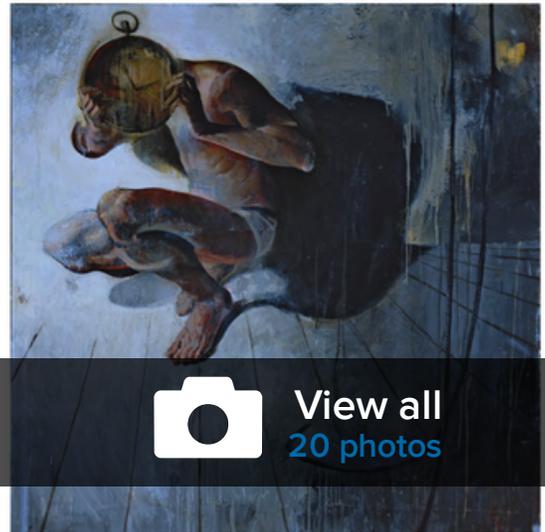
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In modern day art culture it's rare to meet a visual artist with the talent of Edgar Degas blended with Francis Bacon who also exudes character and charisma of someone you want to genuinely get to know, or who is already familiar, like a brother or best friend. Now picture meeting not only this type of artist but also the man behind him, rather the gallery who has been his support system in nurturing his talent.

Meet visual artist, Jason Shawn Alexander and 101/Exhibit's, Sloan Schaffer. I sat down with them a week before the opening of Alexander's latest solo show "No Good At Exit's" which also happened to be the inaugural show for the newest and second location of LA's 101/Exhibit's. (101/Exhibit also has several east coast locations) I discovered not only incredible talented artist in meeting Jason but also a place that encourages and nurtures mid-career and emerging talent under the 101/Exhibit's and Sloan Schaffer's artist residency program.

I sat down with Jason Shawn Alexander and Sloan Schaffer to discuss Jason's fourth solo show " No Good At Exits" and much much more.

Let me begin by saying that I rarely have had studio visits with just painters now a days. It's almost a rarity, especially ones that aren't classically trained. The other interesting dynamic is that Jason is a draftsman, having worked for graphic novel greats such as Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, and Oni Press. So you can imagine how in awe I was to walk into an untouched 3500 sq. space and take in all of Alexander's talent at once. I was so intrigued by both of these men; by their



101/Exhibit

working relationship, their process and how down to earth they are that I actually started the interview with out recording.

Me: First thing I noticed when I look at Jason's work which I also read in other articles and interviews was his work is reminiscent of several master painters; Degas, Goya and Bacon. I almost feel like those three were reincarnated into Jason.

Sloan: We had a similar exercise with Jason comparing him to Larry Rivers.

(In the meeting room at the 101/Exhibit, the work on the wall is Larry Rivers)

Larry towards the latter part of his life and career was working with constructs. He was basically taking a painting, he would paint it on oil and then go through it and separate the layers and build it out using stiropome, totally a different thing. It produced a totally different kind of experience, almost sculptural in a way. With Jason it's not as pronounced but he was able to achieve this in similar ways and just as successful. This sort of additive way of working where he is taking mediums that are traditionally not used in oil paintings.

Me: Such as?

Sloan: Like paper, and ink and things that are more in his wheelhouse using his earlier skill sets. It's created this really incredible dynamic, textured, rich not only composition but also the materiality and the way that the paintings read is so much more dynamic than I think they could have been through this process. The way that he works is that he starts on a paper and the paper ends up on the canvas. You'll see when you see his studio.

Me: So your work is mixed media?

Jason: It's a process I finally discovered about four years ago, my strength and what I'm the most comfortable with is ink drawing. Instead of just doing oil paintings that were just meant to be big oil paintings, I found a way to make these big canvases predominately in ink drawing and then just use oil as a finish to fill in the piece a little bit more.

Every one of these, there is a big collage of paper that has been ripped up and glued onto the canvas so there is kind of a texture, collage work, just paper to begin with and then it becomes an ink drawing.

Sloan: A good example to see is the piece on the other side of this wall (one of Jason's earlier works) it's the dichotomy between the two processes exaggerated enough where it's really obvious. Given Jason's background and how his career has evolved, it was always this early disinterest in letting this illustrative comic book mind of this guy who has his hand in that world as

well as the fine art world. There was an intentional separation and then we all sort of came to the conclusion and realization that, it's silly, Jason is one person, his creative talents are what they are and there is no reason to separate those two worlds. And I think through this process and its further reinforced, won that decision. This is the man and everything he does is worthy of the highest consideration and or representation not trying to isolate one craft from the other.

Me: Were you consciously compartmentalizing those two worlds?

Jason: When I would jump back and forth it was like leading two separate lives. I had to really adjust how I worked and it would take a while when I would jump from a comic project back to painting and I was tired of being two different artists. Now I really don't change how I do a comic book project from how I would do any of these drawings/paintings and vice versa. I just like to draw and paint. Whether it's for an illustration project or a painting.

Me: When did the two of you start working together?

Sloan: I'm a collector so I've been buying Jason's paintings since 2004 or 2005. And then right in 2005 during the "Repeater" show I started buying Jason's paintings and when we opened the gallery he was the first phone call I made.

Me: In Miami

Sloan: In Miami.

Me: So when you started working together is that when the merging of the two worlds merged?

Jason: That merging kind of happened like a few months ago.

Me: Oh it just happened.

Sloan: The way that the narratives went was. Here is this guy who has this life in the comic book world or the illustrative world and were gonna close that door and pretend it doesn't exist and focus just on the oil paintings. But as Jason said, it was sort of like a mind fuck in a way. After spending time with him and the work and seeing everything evolve it didn't make any sense. His talents are so great and what ended up happening was through the exploration of the paper and applying it to the canvas just the way he was working... we all were like, Holy Shit. I mean there is no reason not to combine; you are one person with one singular talent that can be applied to whatever you want to apply it to.

Me: Your body of work is very much about the human condition.

Sloan: The "Insomniac" show that we did in 2009 was an incredibly successful show for both

of us; the references to Bacon and a few others struck a chord. The work in that show was as powerful as this (referring to “No Good at Exits”) but the way the works was created was completely different. It was a more pure expression of oil painting and ink on canvas vs. something that is a lot more dynamic.

Me: I couldn't tell by first glance that some of your canvases had paper in them or that their was anything other than oil, until I studied them up close.

Sloan: Even these are works on paper. (he refers to a few of Jason's large scale paintings)

Jason: Ink, acrylic, watercolor, oil, pastel, coffee.

Me: Coffee?

Jason: There's a point where I know I want to paint something because I work with everything on the floor ill go with a cup of coffee, ill cover the drawing and see what happens.

Me: So you draw first?

Sloan: It's like putting training wheels on a bike, it's what you feel comfortable with until you are ready, and you're going to have a lot more security. For him I think it was the perfect way to build a foundation for these paintings because it's a place where he feels so comfortable.

Jason: It's funny because the experimentation over the years has not been necessarily how do we. I have not pushed myself on how I can go more crazy and expressive, the experimentation has become how do I get away from the more traditional oil painting and how do I keep finding ways to make it more intuitive and personal to me? I am a draftsman. I love drawing and when I did “Insomniac” I knew that when you painted, you paint. And so over the years I've gotten more confident in letting the drawing starting to show through more and its not an experiment for experiments sake, its an experiment as in how do I tap into the core of the painting, faster, the bacon thing, hitting the nervous system faster and harder and for me the drawing is that.

Sloan: And when you study the past shows you'll see certain pieces where you see he let his guard down a little and allowed that side of him to come through. So there are a few pieces in those earlier shows that you could identify something happening and as the years went on everything evolved, it was a lot more apparent. He trusted this process. He believed in it a lot more to let it affect the work the way it needed to be affected.

Me: It seems like the thread to all of your series (to date) thematically have to do with subtle angst. (Not like I broke up with my significant other, adolescent angst) But generally speaking, like a loss or a burden we all carry around with us, even in the slightest way. An affliction, if you

will.

Sloan: You hit on the head; he is a very emotive painter when it comes from a real place. Your happy one-day or your sad and the work reflects those emotions and those feelings.

Jason: When I paint figures it's never the idea of painting the beauty of the figure it is using the figure to get across how I feel. Everything is inside my head. When I was talking to Peter Frank that's what we were talking about. I paint like an abstract painter everything is inside nothing is meant to be, I take tattoos off a people I take anything that's not necessarily going to be timeless. I want to get across what I feel and I just use the figure because I enjoy the figure.

Me: Are you saying that you enjoy the figure and in the way that it becomes the foundation and then the paint is the emotion?

Jason: Absolutely. The figure is just the most represented tool to get the kind of thoughts and feelings across. I don't know in ten years I may very well have a show that's site tumbling, I might have an abstract show. I'm not sure but for right now I love the figure to get across what I feel.

Sloan: It's tied to a larger history of art that I think is important. Also more than anything, this is what I felt in 2005 when I saw his work. I knew he is going to guarantee grab one of those slots in the major art history world. There is so much talent that I was immediately drawn to the work and I immediately thought to myself 'Jesus Christ, how is this being painted by this thirty year old kid, this doesn't make any sense. There is too much insight, there is too much emotion, there is too much wisdom, there's too much.' For Jason I was always in awe of such incredible and tremendous talent that was untapped. And so now even just taking this show out of this immediate context and having the ability to have him be proactive and work adjacent to that, has been so amazing and also has informed his work in an exciting way in having the ability to be in this space. The way he works and the process that he employs is all culminated in an incredible body of work and a really powerful one.

Me: It's true. He is absolutely going down as one of the greats. I noticed also that your color palette is usually very muted.

Jason: It could very well come from loving black and white and ink that I don't really jump too far. I have an instinct for color theory. I don't know I don't want it distracting somehow, I'd like the image to be the important part.

Me: So the layering of the paint is the emotion, not the color, and the figure is the foundation, it's really really interesting.

(I sit and stare at his work. In all honesty after sixteen years of doing this, I've never heard anyone explain his or her process in such a way.)

Jason: Everything comes from the core of emotive part. If you walk by something that I've done and you like it then I don't think I did what I was supposed to do. It should hit, it should either make you feel uncomfortable, or it should make you feel great, as long as it makes you feel something. I never want to paint anything just to make a pretty picture. The only reason I do this is because it's an outlet, it's emotional. A lot of these paintings will go around the world until they come right back to where they started. This painting had at least six vastly different looks to it. It had colors, wallpaper, rooms and settings and I would come back to it and I was like its not right and it distracted me somehow, it became the more aesthetically pleasing but it felt dishonest. So then the background started coming out a little bit the focus becomes more on the figure or the space that the figure is in without being so literal. I don't like literal spaces, I don't like literal anything. I still like some kind of guess work but some pieces work and they just pop.

Me: Every piece reminds me of different styles I've studied whether it's painters from Mexico, Picasso or Rembrandt.

Jason: I'm sure art school would have been more helpful for that, but over the years I've discovered that I don't like one style of painting.

Me: Nor should you but there is a connective tissue even if these paintings remind me of different styles.

Sloan: That's exactly the point. That's why a couple years ago we are like why are we trying to have this separation it's not serving anybody any better than it could if we were to let that guard down.

Me: Who came up with the title of the show "No Good At Exits"?

Jason: Me.

Me: Great title

Jason: Thank you.

Sloan: If it were up to me I'd call it paintings.

Me: Paintings by Jason.

We all have a good laugh and of course, extend this joke for about five more minutes.

Me: When I saw the title and saw the image I was immediately drawn to it. But I have to admit it did make me a little sad.

Sloan: But you felt something.

Me: Well I'm an emotional being.

Sloan: Well we all are. It's just a matter of how much you let it out. How much you are willing to let people in to experience it or feel it.

Me: So this painting is what inspired the title then? (I'm referring to the painting entitled "No Good At Exits")

Jason: Actually it's the other way around.

Me: The title inspired these?

Jason: I came up with the title for the show a little while ago and it was one of these days where I needed to start naming paintings and when I looked at it I was like oh shit it's been like there all the time. It didn't even click but they were perfect for why I painted it, what it is, I titled it and didn't even realize it. They kind of go hand in hand.

Me: I saw that there are two essays in the catalogue by Peter Frank did they have to do with this series?

Sloan: It had to do more with Jason.

Me: When I look at your work I see words. They are poetic. Even though you want to stay away from the literal, maybe it's the writer in me. But every piece conjures up a story in my head.

Jason: This is one of the few pieces, and I don't typically go with a setting, as much as a narrative as it's vaguely implied. Every once in awhile there is one that, well that is the most storytelling image of the show, as far as...

Sloan: I think the triptych has a lot to say to.

Jason: The triptych is like you walked into a room and discovered something you weren't supposed to.

Sloan: A canola oil party....

Me: (mind you, this is when we start getting really giddy and are running with this Canola Oil Party joke)

Jason: Yeah, I don't know what they are doing ... but you know you stumbled on something – these guys have a whole different. There's a history, there's a connection with them.

Sloan: And that to me is the most Bacon like, it has nothing to do with static vs. kinetic piece actually, just in the way the background and the foreground come together and the way the shadow is formed, the way that is composed.

And that's another thing, I don't think that's something you can be taught, is to understand a piece of paper is to understand composition. Forgetting what the image is or whatever you're drawing or painting. Find that sort of balance, positive and negative space and understand your canvas, not like literally your canvas but to understand the size your working on and the space because it's so special and super important.

Jason: Some of these will go to work, like there was work that had to be fixed. Sometimes that's why it takes the around the world concept to get it back.

(The around the world concept is basically painting on your canvas, upside down, inside out, scratching paint off, gessoing it, doing whatever you have to do to get it right)

Me: Do you think about the composition? Do you think about those things?

Jason: Yes but not in the first immediate approach.

Sloan: Really it's at a subconscious level.

Me: It's just seems so natural.

Jason: Oh yeah, I'm not ruling thing with triangles and squares.

Sloan: He would be an architect if he did that.

Me: The triptych is very sexual to me it kind of reminds me of the movie Shame.

Sloan: Okay.

Jason: I just saw that.

Me: So you know the scene I'm talking about then?

Jason: I do.

Sloan: Okay, I said canola oil party so...

Me: I don't really know about those yet.

Sloan: It's a generation before ours. I think.

Jason: There are a few pieces in this show and the biggest one that hasn't gotten here yet.

Sloan: If you're drawn to this type then you're going to go crazy for this piece that's coming.

Jason: 8 x 9 feet

Sloan: Just painted with a really rich textural background.

Jason: I don't think I've ever had people have such different and strong opinions. Depending on whom we are talking to it is sexual it's religious.

Me: Don't those two things go together anyway. They are all grasping onto each other.

Jason: It's not just flesh on top of flesh. They have personalities, and meaning to them. I'm a big fan of painting eye contact without having a shifty element to it.

Me: That's interesting, I don't think I've ever heard of anyone say that before. I don't think I've ever noticed that before.

Jason: About eye contact?

Me: I don't think I've seen it before. Well, In more contemporary works.

Jason: If I do that then it has to be subtle ...

Me: All these figures are dark and dramatic. I have to say I pretty amazed by this. I have not seen talent like this since, well for a really long time. I'm sure you get that all the time. But it's really refreshing. But there's a classic feel that I just haven't felt in forever.

Sloan: It's honest and true.

Me: And timeless.

Sloan: I mean this should be in a museum.

Me: Absolutely.

Jason: There are a couple things that I helped me with this show. One is my new studio space, because it's really important on how I get to work. Two I didn't really quite put it together, but it was last year when we found out my wife was expecting. I kind of felt fulfilled, I'm a man, I'm going to have a family, and being self-conscious about the work, the am I painter or a drawer question literally just went out the window. This has the most comfortable and the most in my

wheelhouse that I've ever been. I've never enjoyed this confidence I have in doing shows.

Sloan: And he's got back up. This is not just a business relationship but also a real relationship. We are a family.

Me: It's rare, nice to have not only as an artist but also as a person who has a lot of genuine support.

I follow Sloan and Jason as they give me a tour of rest of the gallery. In the newest space, which Sloan designed with his architectural background. 101/ Exhibit it a contemporary gallery with high ceilings, wood beams, skylights, exposed brick and large clean white walls but also included a very cool and modern meeting space upstairs with a small library, TV and some of impeccable furnishings from Sloan's childhood homes and then a nice rooftop deck with grill. Downstairs you'll find several artist lofts fit for anyone to live (although these visual artist strictly work from their beautiful spaces) Schaffer is clearly a visionary, you can see this in his eye for detail and his passion for the artists he represents. Not only is he innovative but he is loyal friend. You can tell. During the course of the few hours I was there felt more than just a studio visit with an artist and gallery. It felt familial. Hence why, it took me a little longer than usual to put this piece together. Not only did I feel such passion understanding Jason's work, I also felt a kinship to them. Something that is rarely felt.

No Good At Exits is currently at the 101/Exhibit until May 24th. It is not to be missed.

NO GOOD AT EXITS

101/EXHIBIT

6205 SANTA MONICA BLVD

LOS ANGELES, CA

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For more on the 101/ Exhibit please visit their website <http://www.101exhibit.com>

For more on Jason Shawn Alexander go to <http://www.jasonshawnalexander.com>

Jason is also featured as LA's Independent Creative's Spotlighted artist www.laicreatives.com

