

ART, INTERVIEWS

## INTERTEXTUAL CHIMERA / ASHA ZERO

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"Copying, splicing and pasting of cultural information, appropriating bits and pieces of narrative are commonplace today. It plays a role in linking various systems, so much so that our way of expressing and communicating through a mixture of sources becomes the norm."

**INTERVIEW:** SHANE DE LANGE**PHOTOGRAPHY:** JACQUI VAN STADEN

I have been writing about the work of Asha Zero for a while now, and our dialogue remains ongoing. There is no simple way to describe this conversation. Abbreviated, Asha Zero makes art that explores the affect that

technological progress, contemporary media and communication networks has on traditional forms of representation and language. This investigation currently employs the medium of painting, grafted onto conceptual processes that have historically been connected to collage. These paintings exist within shifting frameworks, depicting the ubiquitousness of the present day, particularly within the context of digital, mediated and virtual spaces. All this whilst adding to established narratives, actively engaging with the rubric of Modernism. Fragmented and scrambled imagery speaks to the historic flow of art starting with Realism, flirting with Dada and Pop Art, briefly visiting Lettrism and New Realism, ending with elements of Urban Art. Asha Zero's paintings are composite images fused with various ideological foundations, amalgamating diverse offshoots of Modernity, Postmodernity and Posthumanism. These contrasting, synthesised surfaces document the everyday spectacle of the Human Condition through combined and juxtaposed source material appropriated from the urban landscape and the present mediasphere. Given this inquiry we are still left with some interesting questions. Continuing our dialogue, the artist and I sat down for yet another chat.

**Your artworks are commonly perceived as collage. However, they are in actual fact hand rendered paintings. Do you think this misreading affects the manner in which audiences read your work?**

It is interesting to see how a person's engagement with the work changes once this realisation is made. All of a sudden something that was perceived as a loose and messy construction is read as a considered and methodically executed artwork. Two opposing sensibilities become one, connecting two different readings, tying a seemingly quick and easy process with a difficult time consuming process. I think it's a bit like trying to read in opposite directions.

**Why did you choose the medium of painting, as opposed to the traditional approach and simply use collage?**

A: It started in a very playful way after art school, and slowly developed from there. I had produced some collage work as an art student and found it a useful and fun way to develop ideas. At some point the thought crossed my

mind to render some of the collages in the tradition of trompe l'oeil, which were convincing as 'collages' and in many cases pleasantly surprised people. So I stumbled into it.

**So you did start your process with actual collage, and then moved onto painting later?**

Yes, kind of. It was a mix-match in the beginning, probably better described as paintings or drawings with collaged bits; typical mixed media stuff.

**We have established that painting is your primary medium, but where does your interest in collage originate from?**

My interest in collage comes from a mixture of sources, specifically the work of Modernist figures – Dada, Surrealist and Pop artists – and the prevalence of their varying approaches to mainstream culture. Things like band posters, punk inspired DIY zines and so on. I was also drawn to the amalgamation of different contexts and the way that collage sets up jumps in logic.

**In what way did Dada specifically influence your work?**

The influence lies in the way that content can be stumbled upon accidentally and shaped organically. Our environments continually present interesting juxtapositions. The clash of discordant scenes, languages and seemingly incompatible ideas – sounds, images, textures, surfaces, platforms – create interesting hybrids. Also, technology now plays a major role in transmitting these conceptual memes and the influence can be seen in the paintings. It influences the range of techniques employed in producing the images.

**Has digital culture facilitated a broader participation in creative expression, and how does this influence your image making?**

Within the context of traditional media and the historical trajectory of Modernism in art, particularly the overlapping offshoots of Pop Art, one can easily notice how technological advances in communication impacted upon these modes of art production. Copying, splicing and pasting of cultural information, appropriating bits and pieces of narrative are commonplace

today. It plays a role in linking various systems, so much so that our way of expressing and communicating through a mixture of sources becomes the norm. The paintings are the result of these types of inputs and processes.

**Are your images informed by the notion that contemporary expression is a kind of collage of offline and online, analog and digital, real and virtual?**

I think so. Mass produced and technologically manipulated images are hybrid memes. If you consider the techniques employed in the production of the paintings, as well as the sourced images, you can notice a cross-pollination of digital modes of production with traditional media, such as pigment on board. There is an interesting interplay between translations of the 'online' and the 'offline', between pixel and pigment.

**So, networked culture is one of the departure points for the work?**

Yes, so much is sourced and transmitted via interactive networks; media that communicates in multiple directions with complex ideas that are formed by the overlap of various technologies. These paintings are hyper realistic images because they occupy positions within crossover zones where the virtual and the physical interchange. The integration of digital networks leaves a viral trace on contemporary art production.

**Would you say that the overlapping of various technologies influences perception to such an extent that Abstraction and Realism become one and the same thing?**

That is a tough question. Yes, it influences the way we observe things. It makes you wonder whether we see more or whether we see less. If so much of it is process driven, are we observing the underlying patterns, regardless of the surface? This is partly the reason why I find images derived from highly mediated source material interesting.

of mechanical and organic elements. So these paintings are the result of an engagement with different modes of production as well as materials and concepts that, like the exquisite corpse, approach authorship in a playful manner.

**Your most recent work exhibits a marked departure from your earlier figurative depictions. What is the reason for this move towards abstraction?**

There is a bit of a departure but it's not really a move towards abstraction because the materials that the paintings are based on are complex fabrications of figure and non-figure; of absence and presence.

**Your recent paintings also resemble the work of the Lettrists and New Realists, particularly Jacques Villeglé. Did this influence you?**

Yes, but only superficially. Our approach to and use of appropriation is different. Simply put, there is an inversion of conceptual thinking between his work and mine. Jacques Villeglé deals with collage as painting, and Asha Zero uses painting as collage.

**It seems that the Urban Art phenomenon is a symptom of the circumstances that you describe. How would this fall within your artistic practice?**

The early paintings were small-scale haphazard portraits. The reference images were idealised body parts taken from magazine cut-outs. As the scale of the work increased so the game between collage and painting changed. That is when Urban Art elements such as graphic stickers, graffiti tags and wheat pasted posters were incorporated into the work. So the larger paintings started to resemble scenes that one would commonly find in urban settings, torn posters on highway pillars, weathered stickers on street poles and messy electricity boxes. I think a lot of the tactics Urban artists use somehow fall into the cross-over zones that we have discussed.

**How do you see your work evolving?**

It's difficult to say, depends on where the process leads. I have dabbled in other media and mediums. I don't see it all locked into painting.

**So, given all this deep shit, I am obliged to ask you, what is your favourite colour?**

I'm going to go with Brick Tamland on this: "I Love Lamp".

From this brief insight into my conversation with the artist, a few things can be concluded. Although it may seem somewhat dystopic, Asha Zero's work is simultaneously dystopic and utopic, multiple and singular. This is because the world does not function according to simplified, archaic binary oppositions and ideological hierarchies anymore. Hence language is not fixed or static anymore. The original now exists in a feedback loop; re-represented, in-between, superimposed, remixed and juxtaposed. Surfaces are scrambled, traces of the original screen, continually disassembled and reprogrammed. If a clear message can be drawn from all this it is that distinctions between the authentic and inauthentic, inside and outside, then and now; all are obsolete.

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