

## Beyond Thought And On Into Action...

the art of ramsey dau

by arty nelson

A few years back, artist Ramsey Dau was strolling the aisles of Stories, his local bookstore when he came across, “The Art of Black Africa” by Jean Laude. Though never a huge fan of African Sculpture, Dau had always understood its place in the continuum of modern art, most notably in the work of Picasso. That said, the slightly archaic black and white early 70’s book seemed a great and weird source to draw upon. “After finding that book, I made a couple simple grey paintings where I incorporated some pages from the book via collage,” recalls Dau. “Then when working on the computer with photos of the paintings, I stumbled across some composition options where the page images were much larger than the real life pages, so I decided I would have to paint photorealistic representations of the imagery in order to be able to play with scale like I wanted to.” As often happens, it was a stylistic breakthrough precipitated by a creative decision made in response to a fairly simple and straight forward need. The resulting works became the genesis of what would make up Dau’s first two solo shows at Art Park and Mild Manners in Australia in 2014 and KM Fine Arts in 2015.

Surveying Dau’s work, it’s evident the artist places a high value on the handmade. That said, getting there Dau employs an exhaustive process using techniques from both the old world and the new; his formally rigorous compositions are vetted in depth both by hand and on the computer. Drawing from a deep well of source material culled from his own everyday life, like images of experimental WWI naval camouflage he found on the internet or patterns designed by Ettore Sottsass for a Memphis Group catalog - Dau has committed himself to not over-thinking or over-intellectualizing his pulsing nearly photo-realistic panels derived from collaged composition studies. In terms of content, however, and that which runs beneath the formal and compositional, Dau is operating more by act of faith, believing that there

are omnipresent forces - both subconscious and unconscious - forever informing one's work.

“At the end of the day, it comes down to aesthetics; I'm not trying to make some overt statement or narrative in the work. It's more about listening to my internal compass in the collection and composition of subject matter, without an intellectual intention, so that the resulting work comes completely from what “feels” right to me. Many of the works, after the fact, feel like they have a point of view and I like that the viewers are open to come to multiple interpretations about what the work is ‘about’.”

Dau's conceptual process is rooted in the “Black Box,” theory of modern psychology; information goes in (us) and something else comes out. What happens inside is the mystery and that mystery is meant to be protected at all costs. In a sense, it's what makes you, you. Mess with the process and the next thing you know the work becomes too planned, too figured out, controlled and contrived. “I like not really knowing what it is or why things are. I mean, sure, there's always some conscious ‘you’ involved, nobody lives in a vacuum.” An aspect of the idea being that by trying not to manipulate or edit one's intention, space is created for deeper intentions to reveal themselves. On paper this kind of idea makes sense but to try and implement on a daily basis one quickly discovers that a kind of emotional courage, even daring, must be adhered to.

Take for example, “Sad Moment” (2016) which is based on a cropped Saint Laurent ad containing a logo and an image of LA's 6th St. bridge; overtop the artist placed a junk car dealer's business card. “I looked at that piece the other day,” says Dau, “and realized that somebody might think the painting's meant to be a meditation on ‘class warfare’ when, in truth, that wasn't my intention at all. But that's the kind of thing one has to live with by choosing to work the way I do and committing to not getting in the way.”

As humans, we are pattern-seeking creatures who ceaselessly yearn to find and make connections. For Dau, the idea is to avoid intentionally making connections between elements while, at the same time, fully understanding and embracing that connections are bound to exist. Just after the fact. “My main objective is to pay

attention to what I'm interested in while doing my best to avoid getting lost trying to service some contrived over-arching narrative. I mean, sure, the fact that I have a piece of something from the NY Times in a work certainly says something about me, as opposed to say, The Wall Street Journal. But I don't want to be the kind of artist who sits around dropping cool, timely references into my work."

While making the African Sculpture series, Dau decided to experiment, painting in versions of the blue tape he uses to post images on his studies. He, also, added shadows projected from the original collage constructions, and even more recently, painted in a chunk of an electrical cord that was dangling in front of a piece in his studio: "I saw it and thought it looked great, and liked that it brought a dimensionality not normally associated with collage." Dau sees all of it as an organic part of letting the process inform the final product as well as, also, a way of challenging himself and making sure his process isn't getting stale or formulaic. In 2014, while at an artists' residence in Australia, Dau incorporated Banksia leaves and a pine cone into works marking the first time that Dau would incorporate three dimensional objects into his collages: "It was a turning point. Instead of just working with cut paper, photos and other two-dimensional objects, I realized I could incorporate *actual* objects, like rocks, pinecones, and paper with bends and folds - real objects which cast shadows and bring a new aspect to the traditions of collage."

For now, the idea of pulling disparate elements together into a constructed model to be transferred back into an entirely painted image is Dau's primary method of art-making though lately, he's begun toying with the idea of creating collages to be shown as finished products. That said, even after the studies are complete, the process of rendering into paint, the final medium, continues to call upon the artist's own, intimate process; the works continue to morph and grow, gestures may be added, shadows shortened, details or aspects left out. In short, the painter's own hand must be the one on the brush. "It's always about finding the balance," says Dau. "The actual painting has to be 'me', it could never be an assistant or something. Like when I was painting my first face from a portrait (for the piece "Turning Inward") and found the lips especially difficult - too much detail and they begin to look like

alligator skin, too little and they look sketchy and half-assed, not blending with the detail in the eye and hair.”

Dau is a fan of the artist Cy Twombly: “What I like about him is how he can make this seemingly sloppy scrawl, this impressionistic mark-making look so perfectly composed and feel so ‘right.’ It’s really not an easy thing to do.” In his own work, Ramsey sometimes incorporates impressionistic “drips” in black and white to balance one another. “A nod to painting,” comments the artist. “Evidence of the hand.” The artist going on to reference the Navajo Indian rug-making process and how a section of the pattern is always left open, “so the spirits can come out.”

Having recently moved into a larger studio, Dau has been able to expand his scale -- early works consisted of twelve and twenty-four inch square paintings -- to begin making three feet and up square paintings as well as, also, branching out into even larger works and non-square works. The spatial breathing room has helped Dau realize his intention of making paintings that work from both near and afar: “I feel that paintings need to work aesthetically and intellectually both from across the room as well as from two inches away. A lot of detail-oriented painters focus on the up close but from far away, the composition has no cohesion. And vice-versa, many paintings that look exciting from far away, fall apart when you get close to them and inspect the quality of the painting technique. For me, a painting is only successful if it can do both.”

Dau, also, likes a super matte finish which, for him, means about eight coats of clear-coat. After that, he uses an orbital sander until he’s satisfied with the uniformity of the surface then finishes with a final layer of clear-coat. It’s a time-consuming process but it yields the muted finish Dau favors as opposed to, say, resin which dries extremely glossy and yellows over time. The matte clear coat process removes evidence of the hand, creating a nearly perfect flat surface. For this show, three of the works have this many-layered process. Says Dau: It just got too labor intensive on the larger works. A matte flat surface is still important to me as it allows for the photo realism of the works to fool the eye (without glares and highlights from different paint textures and masked-off edges).” After much trial and error, Dau’s newer works have been spray-coated with an ultra-matte polyurethane which gives

the artist the flat look he loves but, also, allows for the viewer to discover some evidence of painting technique upon close inspection.

That said, Dau still finds himself locked in his own brand of push and pull; his attempts to honor the hand forever pitted against his desire to create, “a perfect enclosed thing, an impenetrable object.” The same could be said of the artist’s painting process which borders on the photo-realistic but remains merely step along the way toward the finished product. Photo-realism as an end often risks being a trap of technical prowess, overly-concerned with reproducing an image but lacking in a compelling point of view. Dau’s aim is simple: to paint what’s in his head and stay true to that, to keep pushing himself, and to avoid the self-parody that results when an artist begins mindlessly regurgitating what’s worked in the past to meet a demand or a market.

In last year’s show at KM Fine Arts, Dau presented several particularly strong monochromes based on collage studies made from cut paper; part of his intention being for the monochromes to create breathing room between some of the more “technical” pieces. The challenge all artists face with monochromatic work is the problem of deciding how much one can strip away and still be left with something interesting. Dau’s monochrome studies were fabricated with printed black paper - torn magazine ads which meant that the edges revealed a slightly frayed white tear-line. Dau’s challenges did not stop there, however, since transposing each piece from inches in the study to feet in the actual paintings blew up each “tear-line” to nightmarish proportions and had to be adjusted. “I’m not painting exact photo-realistic copies of my studies, but rather making choices throughout the entire painting process, to achieve the look that feels right to me. If I were to paint the torn paper edges with the scale and contrast of the actual study, they would look horrible at such an enlarged scale. Instead, I’ve had to subdue the scale and contrast so that they appear ‘correct’ within the scale of a large painting.”

The title of Dau’s new show is “An Ocean Beneath The Sea.” It was inspired by a sentence the artist initially misread somewhere but then decided he preferred as a misread. “The more I thought about it, I saw it as a nice analogy to the subconscious and how I work, the idea that ‘below’ is something much bigger and deeper.” The

show consists of ten paintings. On display, also, are seven collages which served as compositional models/studies. Roughly half of the works are void of pop cultural references; the others contain trace elements of text, imagery or logos drawn from contemporary culture. Though Dau acknowledges there may be a subtle bifurcation in his current body of work, he maintains all the work comes, creatively-speaking, from the same place. “In the end, my process is the same with both, though with the pieces that are devoid of graphic elements, the focus is more on organic shapes coming together to make abstract compositions, while the other works tend to include more traditional collage elements - photos, type, graphic elements, etc.”

Recently, Dau has begun incorporating color into his work, straying from his beloved grey scale. Last year, he sent two paintings to Miami that contained swaths of color. The addition of color certainly presents some new technical challenges but Dau claims he doesn't get too neurotic about it. For this show, he had Home Depot mix his predominant color, then mixed the required in-between shades at home himself.

Also, for the first time, Dau has included a sculpture in the show, “Oliver (standing)”, an accretion of rounded shapes resembling a tree maybe not quite from this universe, forged and welded and about forty inches tall. Though not originally conceived as a sculpture, the piece emerged as a further exploration of an original cut-paper collage which was, first, used as a catalyst for a seventy-eight inch painting. Executed working closely with a blacksmith, the “leaf” shapes were CNC water-jet cut based on scans of original hand-cut paper collage shapes. “Oliver” marks the artist's first experimentation in taking a slightly dimensional collage into a flat two-dimensional painting, then into a fully-layered, free-standing three-dimensional sculpture. Speaking of “Oliver (standing)”, Dau grins, admitting that the process was a welcome reprieve, a treat even, to the endless hours he spends hunched over one of his insanely-crafted panels.

Dau's many-stepped process offers the eye much to take in formally. Plainly put, the paintings are cool as shit to look at which as far as criterion goes beats everything. But beyond that -- or rather, underneath that - lurks a powerful yin and yang; on one side, is the artist's commitment to craft and refine a vibrant piece of art while, on the other side, is the artist's conviction to protect, from even himself, the

mysterious internal genesis of his compositions, the resulting fruits of Dau's ambitious endeavor look and feel like nothing else presently being produced.