

An interview of Alex Gross by Kenza Chikh, 2013.

First of all, can you recount your artistic career ? When did you start painting ?

I have been painting since I graduated art school in 1990. I did commercial illustration for several years before starting to paint for myself. In 1998 I did my first personal work, and since then I have transitioned from commercial artist to fine artist.

What are your mains themes and can you talk about them ?

I think I have a variety of themes and they have evolved over time. Recently I am interested in painting about the modern condition. Technology and its role in our world, corporate domination of life on earth, the brainwashing of advertising and marketing, these are some of the things I consider themes in my recent work.

Which artistic techniques do you use? How do you proceed to the realization of your paintings ?

I paint with oil paint, usually on canvas, and sometimes on panel, or paper. I do my sketches and comps in photoshop, rather than with pencil. I use a variety of collaged elements as well as some drawn elements, although they are drawn digitally. Then when I am happy with the image, I transfer it to the canvas and begin painting.

Where do you find your inspiration ?

It's a good question. I have a pretty good library of digital images that I have shot and collected over the years. Going through this sometimes helps me find an idea. Sometimes I come across an image that is inspiring, or hear a song that is also inspiring. Sometimes I have a theme in mind and try to build images around it, because it is something that is on my mind at that time, or perhaps it is something in current events. But many times it starts with a simple image. My painting entitled "original sin" started with a simple, vintage coca-cola advertisement from the 1950s. it was so innocent and guileless, and it inspired me to do my own version of the same image in today's context.

Why do you often paint Asian characters ? Can you talk about what you did in Japan ?

I think I paint a pretty even mix of asian and non asian characters. I need to mix more ethnic diversity into my work though. My time in japan was long ago and I don't remember too much at this point. But I do recall being struck by how modern tokyo was and how much it

combined cultural elements from all over the world into its own culture, in a uniquely Japanese way. Almost like "the Borg" from Star Trek.

Can you explain to us the presence of food in your paintings ? (The ice cream cone seems to be an important symbol)

Ice cream is one symbol I have used in my work. Obviously images of fast food would suggest one theme, whereas something like ice cream might be a different idea. I have painted some hamburgers and hot dogs which is a clear comment on consumption and pleasure seeking.

Your characters are often accompanied with modern objects like mobile phones, why ?

I have to fight the urge to put mobile phones in every painting of mine, because the fact is this is the dominant force in today's world. Because of the rapid advancement of cell phone technology and the unlimited ability we have now to do almost everything on our phones, people are no longer able to live in the present moment. In America, and I'm sure throughout Europe too, most people on the street are walking around while looking at their phone. Or on the train, looking at their phone. Although there are many conveniences provided by this, I think it is ultimately a destructive, horrible trend. Regardless of my opinion, I think it is important that my work reflect my world, and in my world most people are either looking at their phone, or talking to it.

Vintage seems to be important for you, especially in the realization of your cards. Can you tell us what you like about vintage ? Can you tell us more about your cards ?

I do like vintage things very much. My work used to be more about referencing vintage imagery. But over the years I wanted my work to reflect more contemporary themes, rather than vintage ones. The cabinet card paintings are a nice side project for me. I do not consider them my main work but they are fun and people respond well to them. Basically they are vintage photographs that I paint over, thereby making a new image from something that was old. I am careful not to obscure the face of the original person, because that is really the point of this project, to show these people who have been dead for so long, in a new context, and one that people might be interested in again. Because, sadly, most people don't pay attention to something simple like a 120 year old photo portrait of someone. But I still love those kind of things.

What do you think about modern art ? It is better than previous centuries ?

That's a very subjective question. Most of my favorite artists are dead. I am mostly interested in painters, rather than 'artists.' Today, 'artist' refers to video artists, installation based artists, and many other forms that are valid but not very interesting to me personally. The high art world does not usually bother with painters. However, there are more people making a living painting now than ever before. So it is a great time to discover painters you like. Unfortunately the art world makes it difficult for most of them to get really well known, compared to the famous names like Hirst, Emin, etc.

In what way is your art innovative ?

I don't think I am innovative really. Perhaps in my digital composition method I am a little more innovative than most of my peers. But I would say the interesting aspect of my work is simply my particular way of looking at things and painting things. It is hopefully interesting and attractive to people, but I don't think it's especially innovative. Doug Aitken is far more innovative than I will ever be. I simply like to paint.

Can you tell us more about your book ?

I have three different books of my work. "The Art of Alex Gross" and "Discrepancies" are both books of my painting and mixed media work. "Now and Then, the cabinet card paintings of Alex Gross," is a book which is exclusively cabinet card paintings. These are the mixed media paintings on antique photos that I discussed earlier. I will have a new book of paintings published next year.

Can you tell us why you often make references to celebrity and luxury consumer culture?

I paint about consumer culture, about advertising and marketing, because these are the things that I have the strongest feelings about. I am attracted to consuming, like many people are. I would like to have a new mobile phone, a nice car, a nice house, etc. but in truth, these things are unimportant and the only reason we desire them is because we have been brainwashed by the advertising/marketing industry. None of us is immune to this. The best we can hope for is to become ...aware of what is going on, and to perhaps change our patterns of consumption so that we do not reward the conglomerates that rape the earth and destroy the environment in order to become even richer.

