



Adobe Mask, 2012

the art of ALEX FISCHER

Words and Interview Harley Young

The visually compelling artworks of contemporary Canadian artist Alex Fischer are a complex view of modern life in the age of information technology and social media. Using elaborate digital techniques to render portraits, landscapes and other abstracted forms, Fischer explores themes related to online identities, the diversity of broadcast information and the development of subcultures on the internet. In an ever changing, developing world of new digital forums and “likes”, Fischer presents images that speak more broadly to the human spirit and ascend the media that was used to create them.

Harley Young: Your back catalogue of artworks appears to be quite varied in terms of medium, from paintings and sculpture to your current digital collage work. Can you please tell us a little about your techniques and if you have any preferences?

Alex Fischer: I've always been interested in using what was at hand, and with computers being so ubiquitous in life, today it seems the digital is most natural place for me to make artwork. I still like to combine the techniques of several traditional media in my sculptural work, but as far flat work goes the digital feels like the most rich environment for me to explore. I collect things like images and interesting materials and then through either digital or physical methods assemble them together. Photoshop is my workhorse, it's where I sketch out, layer, and complete most of my work. Even the sculptures I'm working on today are often digitally sketched out or 3D modeled before they're constructed or ordered. That mixing of different media is really one of the few general constants across in my practice.

HY: The semi-abstracted human figures you present in some of your images evoke intrigue with their visual complexities. Are these portraits based on people known to you or where do your draw your inspiration from to create these character studies?

AF: Well, I think portraits still make up a relevant part of culture. Social media portraits are prolific. Many people put a great deal of themselves into their digital identities. It seems inevitable that

digitality will continue to have an enigmatic effect on peoples' social behavior and sense of self. A digital assemblage then seems most apt for representing the phenomena of being in a digital environment. I try to create something or someone new through the layering of many images of faces. In the end I think one my portraits may be well understood as an image of many people at once, all with their metaphysical baggage on display.

HY: From looking at photographs of some of your past exhibition installations it appears that you explore a variety of images in terms of size and even style, while most artists make variations of the same work or theme when they exhibit. Do you prefer not to be limited by conforming to one overall consistency in an exhibition or do the works stand alone not as part of a larger group?

AF: Whether they are shown on blogs or gallery walls I feel liberated knowing that the works will have a life independent of each other. I come up with work with that independence in mind and treat each as having a unique character. Though changing my style may seem to be a bit counterintuitive for establishing a recognizable oeuvre as an artist it makes sense to me to use, combine, and re-imagine the styles at my disposal.

Also, because the digital has no natural characteristics the style and scale of a work can vary a lot. I like to practice such a versatility of style as means to represent the variety of visual languages being broadcast and blogged everyday. I also tend to suit style to scale. If I've set out to do an image on the scale of

great history painting it makes sense to use that scale to do a digital simulation of brush or paint. Smaller works are prone to have a more photographic aesthetic, and some smaller still may only exist as a screen based work.

HY: Are your landscapes taken from the Canadian countryside or are these constructed environments drawn from the imagination?

AF: I grew up in the countryside outside of Toronto so I definitely have that influence but they are normally not of any place in particular.

HY: It has been said that you explore themes relating to technology and the internet and how this has influenced modern human beings. Can you please elaborate on this or tell us a little about your main inspirations and themes?

AF: Firstly, I think one of the most interesting things spawning from the internet today is the concept of cyberbalkanization. Basically, it's the concept that people will search out and cultivate similar interest groups to the exclusion of others. It's contrary to the traditional idea of the internet facilitating globalization and public discourse. Those things undoubtedly happen, but it's easy to forget that Instagram will only show you who you've subscribed to. The nature of the web means it's unlikely you'll exist within a completely closed circle, but the effect has been to support and accentuate an ever-broadening array of subcultures.

More generally my themes relating to technology stem from an aim to represent the time in which I live. It's easy to see the world today as being heavily influenced by our symbiosis with technology. However, I like to have the entire history of media inform my practice and so I also take up a historical approach to understanding context. The emphasis we put on contemporaneity itself is a pretty recent trend. In big history we've come a long way very quickly, and looking to the future, if Moore's Law stays true we must expect that people will continue to have to adapt to huge technological advances. These advances are not necessarily noticeable game changers but are much more likely to be introduced day by day to us as iterations and updates.

There is a sense that we are tumbling forward hastily in a world so rapidly changing. Truly, in 2005 no one could have predicted that to "Like" something would hold web-culture-clout. Today's vocabulary had just not been invented yet. Similarly cultural language from 2005 now already seems dated. Instagram, Vine, Tumblr; these are just the latest. This shift of language will continue to happen as it has, but now it is augmented and hyper-accentuated by the torrents of digital subculture and social media. I think as an artist I try to brush aside the languages that I think won't have cultural resonance 10, 20, or 100 years from now. I'm representing the human beings I know in their man-made scene both for people today and those who will look back on what we were.

HY: While some of your digital work looks somewhat minimalist, many others are complex layers of photography and very painterly information. Are these works created solely by

computer manipulation or is any paint used at any stage in the process?

AF: These days my flat work is made entirely through digital techniques. Sometimes I'll scan a particular texture or photograph something for reference but the assemblage is all done in Photoshop and Corel Painter. I've done experiments but never really thought that applying paint or traditional collage to a printed work added all that much. I'm more interested in simulating those traditional textures in order to suggest that the digital versions can be just as authentic as the printed work.

HY: Your sculptural works both compliment and enhance the two dimensional representations you also create, and yet the techniques used to make the works are very different. Do you find it challenging to assemble objects in free standing form that appear as if they have walked straight out of one of your digital works on the wall?

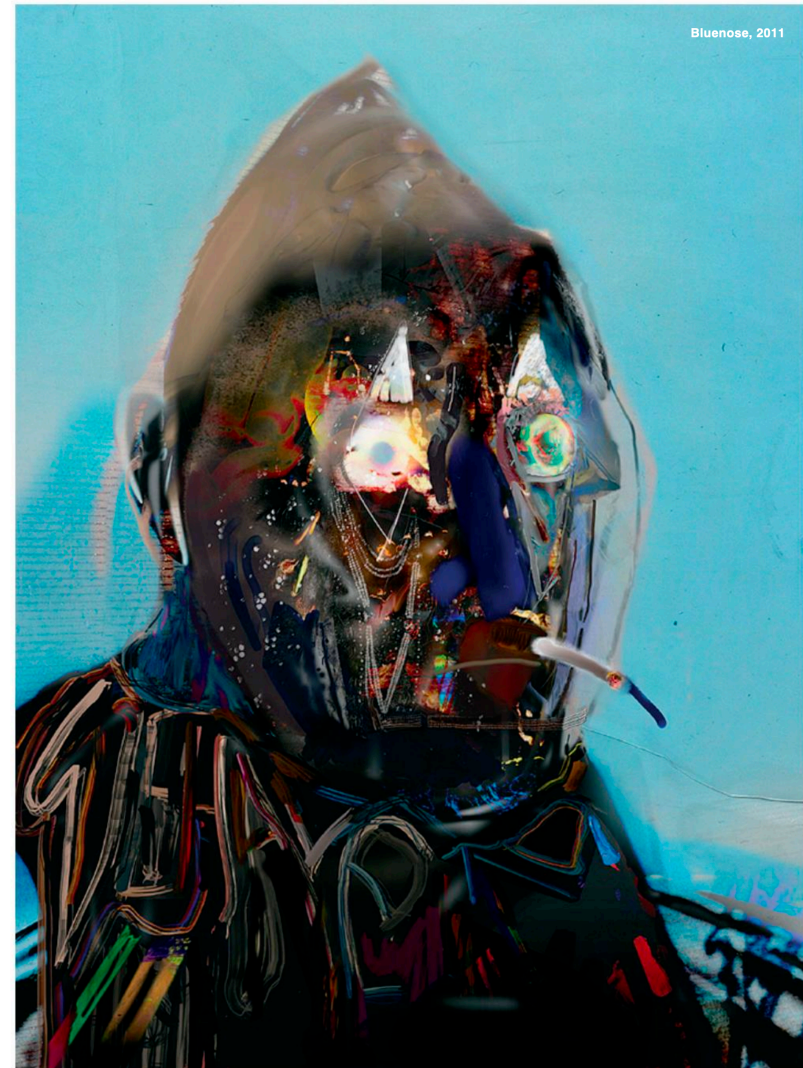
AF: It's definitely a challenge I welcome. The tools and materials are obviously quite different but there are still the same underlying principles of authorship being applied. Both the sculptures and flat works involve a blending of memory, observation, criticism, reasoning, imagination, and reconstruction. I find there isn't as much of a difference as people might think between throwing layers around in a digital space and a physical one. I also think that as 3D printing technologies and augmented reality become more accessible that it is good practice as an artist to hone skills for creating both the illusion of space and actual physical objects. The difference between the two is likely to get less and less distinguishable.

HY: Your work is represented in distinguished corporate and private collections, you have exhibited regularly and are represented by prestigious O'Born Contemporary gallery in Toronto. Would you attribute your artistic success at your young age to anything in particular or offer any advice to aspiring young artists?

AF: Make connections and utilize them. While in art school I applied for as many grants as I could in order to advertise my thesis exhibition to the Toronto arts community. It was a combination of self-promotion and becoming familiar with the gallerists and artists in my local scene that let me know where I wanted to be and who would be interested in showing my work. It's important to keep some network of peers too; people who are happy promoting each others' work and who can also offer some critical discourse. Networking is an inherent part of any arts education today but really is integral for keeping up a practice.

HY: Your first published artists book *Smarter Today* was published by O'Born Contemporary and Wassenaar in 2010. Can you tell us a little of what it is about and do you have any current plans for future publications?

AF: Speaking about self-promotion... As I approached my first major solo exhibition I was interested in translating my digital works into take-home editions. A book is usually a great



Bluenose, 2011



Opposite Page Grandfather Wreath, 2010
This Page Untitled Body Landscape (Part 1), 2007

introduction to an artists work and is affordable for a collector on any budget. I was fortunate enough to have made a connection with Wassenaar publishing and so it seemed apt to produce a limited edition publication basically introducing myself with a catalog of early works. It also offered up a written interview and description of my artistic process, which is still a primary talking point when someone sees my work for the first time.

I think as nice as it is to hold a book in hand my next project will have to be digital. Maybe an iPad style feature that offers some video or detail shots. I'm always working on the design and function of my websites too, which I tend to think of as sort of fluid publications.

artofalexischer.com

Are there any artists who have inspired or influenced you in the past, or are there some favourites you would recommend to our readers?

In the past Daniel Richter, Nigel Cooke, and Peter Doig inspired a lot of my flat work. These days some of my favourites are Enrico David, Mai-Thu Perret, Matthew Ronay, and Tom Friedman.

