

ZAK SMITH

ARTIST INTERVIEW



What inspires you artistically? (Other artists, poetry literature, music, places, feelings etc.)

Often I have an idea and no-one cares so I make art about it instead of telling my friends. Like, for example, I feel like the translation of Rimbaud's poetry collection *The Illuminations* that I have has a sort of bright, morning crispness to me, as if walking through a beautiful marble city after waking up from a long, claustrophobic night full of tension and strange sleeping arrangements, with the streets shot through with color but still quiet with all the citizens asleep. But no-one wants to hear about that and they haven't read the book so I made a picture about it instead.

Have you always worked in your medium, if not briefly explain your artistic journey?

I experimented with every medium in art school, but then so does everybody because they make you do it. I stopped doing sculpture because when I was a student I had nowhere to put it, I stopped doing printmaking because it involved too much cleaning, I stopped doing photography because I learned in a darkroom and that just made it take a really long time to find out you used the wrong lens or whatever, and so painting and drawing was left.

Please briefly explain your process?

First, I try very hard not to make anything. I usually have a backlog of pictures I know I'm already committed to make and getting new ideas is just distracting and bad. But then inevitably something will happen like Emma Webster starts selling a lot of work and so will

commission a portrait or I'll be unable to stop thinking about what if Laney had tentacles coming out of her mouth and is that a metaphor? And if you don't just do the idea then you start talking about it to your friends and that, as I've said earlier, is boring. So you end up making something just to shut up.

The next problem happens when you remember that if you make a picture someone else will look at it and if it's bad that's embarrassing. After all, I spend an awful lot of time complaining about how other peoples' art is bad—actually I should've put that at the top, before step one, because I do that first—complain about other peoples' art. But anyway, I spend so much time complaining that other art is bad that if I made something bad, too, then that would be embarrassing. So then you go "Well, I'm in it, I'm committed to making this picture of Brante on the bed with a toy ostrich, let me at least not embarrass myself".



So then there's often a lot of text messages, like for the series of paintings of strippers doing tarot card readings I had to text strippers and ask if they'd do some tarot card readings, luckily pretty much all strippers in California know how to do that, so we're good. Then we take photos, for reference, and maybe have lunch, and then I sit down to paint, which takes a while.

Afterwards you take a picture and send it to the gallery, then they show it and you put it on Instagram and you explain to people that it's a painting and you like drew it freehand and stuff and it's not, like, a collage or a computer thing.

What do you think the role of the artist is in our modern world?

Ideally the role of the artist is to be less shallow and stupid than whatever common feature of modern life you're sick of this week. This is complicated because a lot of artists are, ourselves, shallow and stupid, or the feature of modern life that you're sick of is, itself, art made by an artist—like oh another Picasso retrospective or another slow jam on the radio



about monogamy--so we have a hard time explaining why we keep doing this. I think it's why interviewers think it's fun asking us this question.

Honestly I can't in any way justify my art in terms of the role of the artist. I mean the world is incredibly ugly and I personally myself enjoy making it look better, but as much as I want everyone to like what I like, they keep liking what *they* like, which is inconvenient and makes it hard to honestly present what I personally

make as socially helpful. I mean I could say something about seeing sex workers as people but let's face it no-one has ever cared, like Susan B Sketchy and Kayla Tange probably got a lot more done for strippers by trying to organize the Star Garden strippers union than I did by drawing them.

Most things are not only awful, ugly and dishonest they're awful, ugly and dishonest because it actually makes people money to keep them awful, ugly and dishonest so it won't stop being un-awful, un-ugly, or honest in our lifetimes. Despite itself often being awful, ugly and dishonest, art *should* be the other thing. Un-awful, beautiful and about what people really think and want and are. That's hard. I try though.