

ART AND CAKE

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A Conversation with Maja Ružnić and Josh Hagler (Part I)

by Kristine Schomaker

Kristine Schomaker: Thank you for inviting us to your studio! One of the reasons I wanted to interview both of you is because you are all-in in the art world. You are what I call “Artist’s Artists.” You’re authentic and romantic. Romantic in all senses of the word. I remember seeing your work at the TAM show Sincerely Yours and being smitten.

I’ve enjoyed following your blog posts/magazine articles. Josh, I know you’ve done two or three articles on How to Give a Shit? (at the date of the interview)

Josh Hagler: I’ve done three; the fourth I have got to get to work on.

KS: You’re putting it all out there and you’re brave. It’s incredible for the art world and I think it’s important for other artists to see that. It made me think about the differences between the New York Art World and L.A.

JH: I was just there recently actually, so it’s really fresh in my mind. I was in a group show and I met several of the artists that are represented by the same gallery. I relate to their existence in the sense of how my existence was in San Francisco. They’re just required to work so much more to afford really basic things – more than in LA – which is why I think so many people are moving here. In LA, I think it seems that everybody I know actually works really hard, but they act as if they’re not. There’s some kind of a virtue here. In New York, it’s the opposite: You want to show that you’re a really hard worker.

The other thing I noticed in New York is that they can be a little bit more distant when you first meet them, because the art world is so much more compressed. We still have a long way to go to reach the ceiling that they have. The whole dynasty and celebrity system is all compressed in this very small area and it’s like you’re supposed to feel shamed if you don’t know something. So, the standoffishness is a way of looking like you’re in a better position than you are. You don’t want to look like a loser. People want to support the winners. Then everyone drinks too much and people start to open up. That’s when you realize everyone is about to fall to pieces and they can barely make ends meet and that they are in therapy. It’s like everyone is just barely making it! After that, they are really nice and friendly and easy to get along with. It’s like you have to get through that first barrier.

KS: That is interesting. In LA we do so much on social media. We put ourselves out there on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Do you find that it’s the same in New York?

JH: I think there is a lot more social etiquette there and we haven’t got the memo to know that we’re supposed to be embarrassed by some of our behavior.

I think it's a nicer feeling when you're here actually making friends with people. We just had Elliott Hundley in here for a studio visit the other day. That happened very easily and it wouldn't have happened in New York, even if he was the same person he is and I am the same person I am..

Maja Ružnić: It would have been harder to break that boundary.

KS: We saw the Elliott Hundley show at Regan Projects too and fell in love with it. I told one of my artists to go see it. He went to the closing and he was excited by the work. I suggested that he call Regan Projects and see if Elliot would do a studio visit with him. He did and Elliott's manager got back to him and offered to have him come by.

MR: Oh my gosh, there you go! I believe that if you can do it in a tactful way, if you just stay true to yourself, I feel like good things can happen. I got a show that way in Sweden. I met another artist in New York and on Instagram we liked each other's work. Then he asked if any of my galleries would like his work because he knew a gallery in Sweden that would like my work. It actually worked so that his gallery said yes to me and the gallery in Dallas that I work with liked his work. We both had shows. We both sold work.

KS: That's amazing!

I first met both of you at the Fine Arts Building during Gary Brewers show a couple years ago I think. So I've gotten to know you through social media, art events, and following your work of course. Which brings me to the Studio Systems show, TAM's experiment with making the creation process more transparent. Can you talk about how that experience was for you Josh?

JH: It was good. I was really grateful for it. It was a mix of things really. I actually feel that I made a really good piece there. But – and Max hated hearing us say this – we felt like we were in a zoo. It was open during the week and the only people who come into the Torrance Art Museum are retired. You'd get maybe 6 or 8 visitors a day and most of them don't really talk. Plus, I had periods where I really didn't want to talk. It was the same with all the other artists.

KS: I see your use of social media and blogging as an art form as well and I read somewhere that words are also part of your medium. Your writing on the art world on How To Give a Shit is really thought provoking. In looking at both your paintings and your writing your work, besides the idea of romantic, I think of your work as being very poetic. I think these terms are good to describe what both of you do. As I'm thinking about it now, even Elysian Passage comes to mind as well.

MR: Maybe like full involvement. I would say that is true of both of us. We really get in there! Like this morning, we're going to drop our car off to get it repaired and I said, I can do something to make our car ride more fun — let me read R.B. Kitaj's [First Diasporist] Manifesto. So, he's driving and I'm reading...

JH: And crying

MR: And I'm crying because I'm really moved by it.

KS: Yes, I've seen your posts on the diaspora.

MR: Yes, we're both really mushy and I think when you're that way it makes you want to get into things. We were watching Stranger Things, and I felt I needed to join something online where we can have discussions about this show. I can't just take it or leave it. I take it and obsess about it for months.

JH: Did you guys see True Detective, the first season? We were both nuts about it, but she came back to me with all this homework she had done...

MR: I was reading essays! It's like what you said about wanting to be in the art world for the conversations. I think we feel like you're fortifying the thing with vitamins, by having other people join. Elysian Passage, the collective we're going to have, is all about having a pool of people where we can have the yummy conversations that you don't always have because you're talking about more practical things.

JH: Artists talk about the business way too much. All that talking about it is not going to help.

KS: It's all of that, your reading of the diaspora, how passionate you are about it, the research that goes into the artwork, that attracted me to come here today. We visited Samantha Fields the other day, she was my professor and mentor at CSUN, and she showed us her sketchbook with her newest artist statement. It was written out as a diagram. It's part of the process and part of the research that we don't really see, but that expresses the romanticism of being an artist. We need to bring that back, especially in LA, especially with social media. I hate to bring this up, but everyone is an artist with their phone, everyone is a photographer, but it takes something special to be something else.

JH: It's interesting the relationship of the virtual to the real, the way that the virtual makes the real more valuable than it was before. For most people, if you're like sitting on the toilet scrolling through Instagram really quickly, it doesn't make a difference if these things really exist.

But should you go out and see this stuff... Some people think that, in the future, the physical won't be so important, but others might think it will be more important than ever. I'm more in the second camp.

KS: You are both very physical in your work, but there is also a lot of religion and spirituality, especially in your work, Josh. I have read other interviews where you talked about the importance of religion and its history and our relationship to it. Has that changed for you over time in making the work? Can you tell us more about that?

JH: I think that is such a big question. The first work that I did that got me any attention was very squarely and directly about my experiences growing up in the church. My anxiety and feelings towards that. In my family and personal life, I have gone through a lot in that context. I was making paintings of church congregations. Specifically, I would go look at the congregation of the church where Pastor Ted Haggard preached for a while. As you know, he was outed for having bought crystal meth from a male prostitute. I would make paintings of just the congregation, without making a direct portrait of him, or trying to make something didactic to say whether religion is good or bad. I'm not into that. From there, when I thought more about religion, I would ask certain kinds of questions that would generate the next line of inquiry for the work.

I think the work probably got more complex from there, but it all came from this question: What is religion?

That big painting you are looking at here is part of a body of work that comes out of westward expansion. The European settlers felt entitled, that God gave them this land for civilizing. So the various Native American cultures that already existed were seen as pagans that didn't have the right to be there. The Europeans believed they needed to civilize them or change them. They called this the white man's burden. I followed some of those questions and that lead to questions like, what is progress? What does it mean to be a descendant of a colonist? I started to think about time differently. The way I was looking at the past was to say something relevant about the present. And then I started looking at science fiction films in this question of progress and how they fit into time.

I'm looking at theoretical physics right now and how we simplistically say this is religious and this is scientific. It's not that simple. There is this overlap in a sense. Our questions that lead to scientific discovery are essentially religious questions. So we look to various places to still satisfy these religious impulses and that is a lot where my work is landing now.

KS: Is this all new work in your studio?

JH: Everything in here was made this year. People will oftentimes ask when something was made. They're all made relatively at the same time. But some people think they might not have even been made by the same artist. Which I love! That's actually part of this body of work that I'm developing.

KS: Do you feel the physicality of the work corresponds to the spiritual or more to the philosophical?

JH: I think I can answer the question about what these are and then inferences can be made in how it might be religious or more spiritual. First of all, when you put these two doors together, they are 60 x 80 inches. I had some canvases made intentionally to the same size. These are titled, *From Above the River Presses* and *From Beneath the Quiet Lures*. One is made to feel like the Missouri River and the other like the Snake River. These were the rivers that Wilson Price Hunt and Lewis and Clark took in the westward expansion. When I started using film stills to make the last body of work, I began thinking about what film is, so that lead me to concepts in theatre or cinema, like the fourth wall. It's a concept, not a physical thing, but it exists by virtue of a mutual faith between the performer and the audience. We all suspend disbelief, to believe that we're not before the performance, and the performer believes they're not before an audience. For all intents and purposes that's what's showing up. But what if you give form to this thing that only exists conceptually as an item of mutual faith? That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to show an actualization of this fourth wall.

I've been thinking a lot about what I value about realism. Why I have never fully walked away from it. I've been able to get it down to two things: weight and light. There is something important about the way that weight and light can be conveyed through realism. When I painted this one, I thought about ways I can give it real weight and light. These are very heavy and there's also lights actually installed. Whereas this other one is psychologically heavy; it has physical weight, and the light is the light that is reflecting off of his helmet. I conceive of these as if they were being displayed

across from each other, in some kind of conversation, where suddenly the fourth wall shows up and that's what this figure has to confront.

But, also I'm obsessed with this idea of passages and moving from one plane to another. I'm interested in space and time right now. I thought I'd take these doors and turn them on their side. When they're upright they seem like something you can pass through, but when you turn them on their side, as simple of a gesture as that is, it feels like a wall that could never be passed through.

KS: I love that and I love the conversation. It will be great to see them in a show.

You have recently been teaching at La Sierra in the Inland Empire? I met with Jennifer Frias from UCR and she talked about how the Inland Empire is finding its voice in terms of contemporary art.

JH: I think it's good to assume that there is always more going on outside of the metropolitan areas than is given credit for. They've had some amazing shows at La Sierra! None of that stuff gets any press. It's not that it doesn't exist it's that there isn't an infrastructure out there to support it. And that's like all over the country.

MR: In some sense things have not changed at all when you see what is being put into the art historical timeline. I was on Instagram today looking at an artist that I like and I clicked on a gallery where he's having a show. I saw that there were 22 artists on their roster and only two were women. When I look at all my favorite galleries, there are still just two to five female artists. I get this visceral anger, when people say things have gotten better. No they haven't. Not enough!

KS: I just read an article that MOCA is only going to show women over the next year.

MR: You know, there are times when I'll hear something like that and I think that's really discriminating, but then, the galleries who only have two women on their roster, they're not apologizing to anyone, they are discriminating! So why should Helen Molesworth?

JH: You see this happening in a lot of areas now, which is good because you can't ignore it. But, the danger is that it becomes a fad. It then goes back to business as usual. I think it's going to be a matter of converting all that energy that everybody was putting into trying to create more equality for women in art, to having more curatorial exclusivity again. Because although that maybe seems exclusive to one gender, it's actually pretty inclusive, in that it doesn't have an aim. I think if there's more of a curatorial aim, where it's not so much the first word that you see in the press release, then that's going to be better in the long run for more women being represented in everything from galleries to museums. Then it becomes a social norm and it doesn't become the one thing that we did.

MR: It's like when you squeeze a pimple – it's going to look worse before it gets better. I think we're at a time when we're overly calling these things out. I actually think it's more in the US. A lot of my favorite galleries in Europe, are very sexist! Like in Antwerp and Berlin. I feel in the US we are all about equality and so in-your-face that you can't ignore it. And curators are now rolling up their sleeves saying, yes we better do this. A lot of my favorite galleries are in Europe – galleries I would die to be in. I do this thing now where I count the names and so I can see what gender is represented. It really makes me angry in such a way that I sometimes force myself to not look at the roster.

Someone just did this study that collected data from the fairs. She looked at the number of galleries and who they brought to represent. It was unequal. You would not think it is 2016! That's why it has to be in your face. Because the reality is so harsh. I think the anger inspires people to claim their place. I, too, wish that it was more equal so that there is less anger and more celebration of good art.

KS: I think the word feminist is going to be with us for a long time.

Josh, how did your column *How To Give A Shit* happen?

JH: Do you know Mike Reynolds? He was going to start this website and asked me if I wanted to write something for it. I was really excited to be asked. I had different experiences in the LA art scene that left me feeling unsettled or rubbed me the wrong way. I wanted to write something to help me preserve my own center – to make it so I could feel good about things. I had to take more responsibility for having experiences that I wanted to have. I couldn't just complain about something that I stepped into by accident. Then the website didn't come to fruition, but I'd already started writing this thing. Venison had done an interview with me for their site. I saw that they hadn't been around for a while and that they had a staff of only four people. So I asked if they were interested in looking at what I had done. They really liked it, they took it and now I'm writing for them.

KS: It's hard today, there aren't very many negative reviews and there aren't that many think pieces on the art world, especially by artists. That's one reason why I like following Mark Dutcher. He wears his heart on his sleeve and says it like it is.

JH: I love when people make these dismissive remarks about what Facebook ought or ought not do, "Nobody should be personal," etc. If there wasn't anyone like him, I would have no reason to be there. He gives me a reason to actually be on there. And it also gives me permission. I was already pretty vocal before I was friends with Mark on Facebook, but he just takes it to another level. You realize everybody has different ideas about what they think social media is for and that's fine. I realize that my tribe are people like him who want to put it out there. I don't know Mark really well, but just in terms of exchanges online, he's a good one to keep an eye on and when he responds to something that I have I always feel good about that.

KS: Are there any shows that you've seen lately that you think people should see?

JH: London Calling over at the Getty. That's just a really powerful show and it feels like a good time for it to be here in L.A. When I first landed in L.A, I hoped I had made the right decision. I don't see work that seems like it's thinking about the same things that I'm thinking about or I don't know where I'll find a home for my work. But, more and more, I've been seeing signs that a different kind of alignment is in formation and that show at the Getty feels like a show of some kind of painterly ancestor. I feel like I learned a lot and that there is content in that work that is psychological. That's the thing; I couldn't find any work that was in any way psychological when I first came to L.A. Now I'm seeing more and not only was that work psychological but it was like a lightning strike to the psyche.

KS: It is tough here because a lot of work in LA is topical.

JH: Yea, the same with San Francisco actually, but just in a different way.

I think it's kind of phony to reproduce an image that just happens to be on the news a lot right now and say that it's relevant. It might be or it might not be. I'm not the gatekeeper of that. As Nick likes to put it, it's checking all the boxes and you still feel nothing.

MR: Also if it's in the news already, it's already relevant, so if you make art about it and it doesn't get transformed...it's like saying something's relevant that's already relevant. Do you know what I mean?

JH: It feels desperate.

KS: Maybe it's just those artists trying to find their voice? Until they get to that point...I don't know. It's a really good question.

KS: Do you have any upcoming shows?

JH: Not as imminently as Maja. Not in L.A. I have something coming up in Miami that I'm looking forward to. Then next year at the Brand Library. We kind of have different moments and it's really Maja's moment right now.

KS: How does that work for you guys? They always say you shouldn't date another artist.

MR: They're right!

JH: That's good advice!

MR: In some ways it's really hard. All the things you have with your friends, the little jealousies, the situations where someone meets both of you and wants to give one a show or a collector comes in liking both work and then only buys the other. It's the same things you have with other people; just now you share a bed with them. So just crank up that volume to 10! It forced us to be very good communicators. I feel like one strength in our relationship is there is very little ambiguity with emotions. We now say if we're feeling really jealous. When you do that, what can the other person do? It inspires a hug rather than being weird. Both of us are good detectives with weird funny behavior. It's hard, it really is, there's no other way to put it. But it's amazing reading RB Kitaj's Manifesto in the car and being moved together rather than having someone that you can't do that with. Because I've dated non-artists before and it's different. You kind of have your own little bubble. So there is good and bad...but more good.

JH: I just accept it as a fact at this point. I don't really...I mean we're here now. Are you going to dump me tomorrow?

MR: Probably not.

JH: I hope not.

MR: I think that's also it, we both know that we're sensitive individuals. Even though we appear strong and opinionated, at the core, I think both of us are. We know that about each other. We make this joke that we have matching neurosis.

JH: We're weak. We're really weak.

MR: We're weak. So that helps. So there's your answer!

In Part II we will continue our interview and visit Maja's exhibition at CES Gallery.