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AN ART-WORLD LION FINDS A DEN IN A MIDCENTURY LANDMARK

by Julia Felsenthal



The artist Peter Halley stands in front of a mock-up of one of the shaped canvases he's creating for an installation at Lever House in Midtown Manhattan. Credit...Nicholas Calcott

Walk into the artist Peter Halley's sprawling West Chelsea studio and the first thing you'll notice is a massive plaster cast replica of an ancient bronze sculpture of Poseidon, procured from the Athens archaeological museum a decade and a half ago. He — Poseidon, not Halley — stands nude and musclebound on a rolling platform, arms outstretched like a surfer, hovering in front of a shelf of fluorescent paints. "I never meant to leave it here, but it's just so perfect," says the painter, gazing fondly at the Greek god looming overhead. One time, a snooty European collector visited and snarked that Cy Twombly kept actual antiquities in his studio. The artist chuckles. "I was like: 'I'm not Cy Twombly.'"

Halley, 64, a born-and-bred New Yorker, lion of the '80s East Village art scene, publisher of *Index* magazine (now defunct), and former director of Yale's prestigious M.F.A. painting program, is standing beside a model of his newest project, an ambitious site-specific installation at Midtown Manhattan's Lever House. Bespectacled, fingers flecked with sherbet-colored paint, he's soft-spoken and impish, with a bone-dry sense of humor and an aversion to self-glorification. He models himself after Andy Warhol — "everything I know about the construction of culture I got from him" — and subscribes to the Warholian notion of the artist as an "everywoman or everyman, a person who does something that we all could do, but for some crazy reason wanted to go out and paint white paintings, or whatever." (This may be why he proudly displays his own portrait by Warhol above the studio's toilet.)

The ersatz Poseidon, infused with wry, nerdy wit, is just the right mascot for Halley's art practice. "I really believe in humor as a creative engine," he says, "going all the way back to the idea of the square becomes a prison." He's referring to the minimalist visual vernacular he's used for more than 30 years to illustrate the universe as he sees it. In a Peter Halley painting there are rectangles locked behind bars ("cells" and "prisons," as he calls them, which reference social control and containment, not just incarceration) and lines that sprout from them ("conduits," pathways for the flow of information). Rendered in flamboyantly artificial, lowbrow materials such as Day-Glo acrylics and a stuccoish compound called Roll-a-Tex, his paintings resemble LSD-fueled abstractions, or possibly cartoonishly bright, invitingly tactile corporate flow charts. Actually they're diagrams of our geometrically regimented, digitally

networked society, equally informed by the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, and Halley's own youthful malaise, lonesome in his East Village apartment with the landline as his primary connection to the outside world. That the paintings basically prophesied the age of smartphones and social media is testament to his vision, and that of his beloved French theorists.

A pan of Roll-a-Tex, whipped up with hot-pink paint and resembling lumpy cake batter, sits in one corner of the studio, awaiting Halley's ministrations. The artist has six assistants — they buzz around us as we chat, some prepping canvases — but he makes a point to apply the Roll-a-Tex himself. This part of his process began as a sort of pun, a satire of “New York painterly painting,” with its endless fetishizing of gesture. When he returned to the city in 1980 — after Andover, Yale and an M.F.A. course in New Orleans — he found other painters trumpeting their signature textures; he figured, “I’ll just roll mine on.”

Halley grew up in Manhattan, in an apartment on 48th Street and Third Avenue. In his childhood, the neighborhood was transformed by newly erected glass-and-steel high-rise office towers, among them the Mies van der Rohe-inspired Lever House on Park Avenue. Next week, Halley takes over its first two floors to mount “New York, New York,” his most complex installation yet. The artist shows off his model of the building's lobby, in which he'll construct a warren of adobe hutlike interior rooms, his first “punk” venture into architecture after decades mapping space in two dimensions. On the exterior of the installation he will display six new paintings; they are still prisons and conduits, but now Halley has mashed his canvases together to form ungainly new shapes, as though his cells are staging a jail break. Inside are three rooms wallpapered in a smorgasbord of signature motifs: Halley's '80s sketchbook drawings, digitally printed onto a radioactive-looking yellow backdrop; images of gooey cartoon explosions, displayed under color-shifting LEDs; a mesmerizing blue matrix of cells that glow like computer screens beneath a “pseudo-mystical” black light.

It has an underworld feel. Halley cites the Egyptian tomb of Nefertari as an influence but confesses a personal angle, too. “I've always been reluctant to talk about it,” he says, telling me about his lawyer father, Rudolph Halley, chief counsel for the Kefauver committee inquiry into organized crime who became “an instant folk hero” grilling mobsters like Frank Costello on television. The elder Halley died when his son was only 3. “That loss is certainly part of my psychology,” the artist acknowledges, drawing a link between the way he sees the imprisoned cells in his paintings standing in for humans and the way a gravestone does the same for the deceased. “I'm vaguely aware with all that of a desire to memorialize. I'm about to turn 65, and circling back to Lever House, New York in the 1960s, this neighborhood, which I have unconscious associations with, is very poignant.”

In the critical essays that Halley published in the '80s and '90s, he explored that question of unconscious versus conscious impulses. It remains a preoccupation. He unearths an early painting from 1983, an austere canvas depicting a solitary prison and conduits leading underground to vacant tomblike chambers. Later he pulls up a photo of himself as a young man standing in front of his apartment building, behind him a stucco wall with a small window covered in security bars. He laughs. “I was painting these prisons with Roll-a-Tex. One day I looked back and said, ‘Oh my God, I'm painting my home!’ ”

Critics of Halley's work say that it's too reiterative, that it hasn't evolved. (He's “forever trapped in a Day-Glo prison” Index co-founder Bob Nickas chided in a review of Halley's Greene Naftali show last year.) The painter brushes it off. He grew up looking at artists like Mark Rothko, Cezanne and Agnes Martin who did “the same old thing, decade after decade. So I thought that's what artists did! They found something that was psychologically resonant for them and explored it in depth.”

Recently someone told him: “You know, Peter, if you do something for 20 years, people think it's boring. If you do it for 30 years it gets interesting again.” He grins. “I'm lucky in that sense.”