

THE SAATCHI GALLERY NOVEMBER, 2007

SCOTT HUNT
IN CONVERSATION WITH
ANA FINEL HONIGMAN

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Scott Hunt, 'Death and the Maiden (Musical Interlude)'

David Lynch has famously declared that, "I don't like the word ironic. I like the word absurdity, and I don't really understand the word 'irony' too much. The irony comes when you try to verbalize the absurd. When irony happens without words, it's much more exalted." Scott Hunt acknowledges that his work is heavily inspired by Lynch, along with over noirish neo-gothic post-modern masters such as Edward Hopper, Charles Addams, Gabriel García Márquez, Andy Warhol, Andrea Mantegna and Joyce Carol Oates, as he conveys the sense of exalted absurdity Lynch is famous for in meticulously crafted charcoal drawings.

Hunt ransacks flea markets in search of vague and banal vintage photographs and then constructs strange narratives in disarmingly skillful reproductions. 'Irony' is a simplistic term for what he does, because he is not overtly debunking anything - except our comfort with images extracted from the past.

Hunt, who lives in Manhattan, was born in Ossining, a village in Westchester County, New York, and went to school at Parsons and Pratt in Manhattan. But his hyper-realistic drawings have a distinctly Southern Gothic allure at odds with his East Coast CV.

Hunt has had drawings commissioned and published in the illustrious pages of the *New Yorker*, *Harpers*, *Esquire*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *GQ* and on the covers of books printed by Simon & Schuster and Saint Martin's Press. But his gallery show at New York's Goff + Rosenthal in 2006 was his first solo show ever. "Death and the Maiden," his follow-up show in summer 2007 at the gallery's Berlin space, was one of the most disquieting and unforgettable solo shows I'd seen all year. The images managed to be ambiguously witty and compellingly creepy at the same time. We talked about his work in a series of emails.

ANA FINEL HONIGMAN: In "Death and the Maiden," many of your drawings reference '50s iconography or fashion. Why that era?

SCOTT HUNT: My interest and connection to the imagery of the '40s, 50s, and some of the early '60s has to do with the unique quality of the snapshots of that period, a result of the photographic technologies and general processing quirks that affected things such as contrast and depth of field. There's also an iconic, post-modern sensibility to so many of the human figures - a kind of "everyman" quality - which I find useful when I'm trying to create a piece that's allegorical. Additionally, I'm trying to comment on the American experience with much of my work. So, for me, most of the best American iconography comes from Hollywood movies of that era and I try to reference that imagery.

AFH: That era's aesthetic has been so heavily mocked in ironic satires like John Waters films, or "The Cult of the Subgenius" underground imagery; do you really think it is still representative of something relevant in American culture?

SH: I don't think that John Waters is mocking the aesthetic of the '50s; if anything, he's fetishizing it. What he's mocking (primarily in his later movies) are the social and moral conventions of that era. For me, that continues to be absolutely relevant to the current political landscape in America. The religious and social conservatives in the U.S. are still trying to steer society back toward a '50s world view where white, straight, Christian men ruled and the messiness of life wasn't so much in the public eye. I think it's incredibly important to continue to punch holes in that ideology. I address this in my work by focusing on the flawed human dramas that are often running concurrently just beneath the surface of the "Leave it to Beaver" ones.

AFH: Joyce Carol Oates is cited as a reference in your press release. What in her vast oeuvre are you specifically evoking?

SH: I love most of her work but I draw inspiration from the specific period when she was writing her "gothic" novels, "Bellfleur," "A Bloodsmoore Romance," and "Mysteries of Wintherthurn." I love the dark and mysterious aspects of those works and I'm drawn to the way in which Oates only suggests the lurid plot details to the reader. I try to emulate that in my drawings; I have a narrative that I'm working with but I prefer to leave things somewhat unresolved and enigmatic for the viewer.

AFH: Do your viewers tend to try to settle on a particular narrative explanation for what's on offer in your images, or do you think most viewers respond to the ambiguity?

SH: That's hard for me to know. I've certainly had lots of people interpret particular drawings for me, which is always fascinating. And I've overheard some hilarious explanations of works when people didn't realize that I was standing behind them. I completely understand the desire to know the definitive meaning of a piece, but I think it's most satisfying for me when viewers can embrace the unknowable.

AFH: Would you say your work is 'Gothic'?

SH: I wouldn't use that term, no. But the work definitely has a dark, lush, and twisted quality, which is consistent with the gothic sensibility.

AFH: What are the most significant differences you've found between working as an illustrator and creating drawings for a gallery context?

SH: The job of an illustrator is to help express the vision of a writer (or editor, or art director, or sales rep). In the beginning of my illustration career, I was especially interested in book jacket work because it combined my love of literature with my love of drawing. But a struggle began to erupt between the job of faithfully interpreting the written word (as defined by the publisher) and my need to express myself fully. As a fine artist, I'm completely free to express an idea in any way that I see fit. If I envision the characters of Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying" as a group of circus clowns (and I have), then I can create that with impunity.

AFH: You know the FT Saturday magazine has a column on book jacket art. Faulkner and clowns may not pass through the publishing brass, but otherwise it seems that liberal interpretations of texts are welcome in that profession. What are some book jackets you think were particularly successful?

SH: I think the European and American markets are quite different but there's certainly wonderful and inventive work being done in US book jacket design. Graphic designers like Chip Kidd, Stefan Sagmeister, Rodrigo Corral, and Paul Sahre are making beautiful covers that function both as communicators and as art in their own right.

AFH: Did you start collecting vintage snapshots for this project specifically, or has this been a longtime hobby?

SH: It's been a very longtime hobby. As a child, I was incredibly interested in family snapshots. My parents are both first generation Americans and therefore much of my extended family wasn't local. My mother's family was from Barbados and, probably because her family was so much larger than my father's and because she was a good storyteller, I became intrigued by her relatives who had remained on the island. Their stories seemed so exotic to me and looking at photos of them helped connect me to them while keeping me at a frustrating distance as well. That allowed or nurtured my imagination to naturally develop images and narratives to flesh-out the pictures I was viewing.

I first began incorporating family snapshots into my work in college, using them as the basis for silkscreens. Then I eventually began using the discarded snapshots of strangers, mostly because they carried less personal history with them, giving me license to imagine darker, funnier, or more compromising narratives. Anonymous snapshots engender a slightly different sensation in me as well: I'm at once struck by the intimacy and voyeurism of the

experience while simultaneously feeling desperately cut off from the specific details that inform the lives of both the subject and the photographer. But I suppose that only fuels my imagination more intensely.

AFH: Are you generally a fan of photorealism?

SH: People often mention that my drawings “look like photographs” but I don’t define or think of my work that way. I have the technical facility to create a great deal of fine detail in my work, but if you get close to the originals, there are areas that are quite loose and almost painterly. Clearly, I’m a huge fan of photography but I’m not at all interested in merely reproducing a photograph or in attempting to trick the eye of the viewer into thinking that what they’re looking at actually is a photo.

AFH: So, you are not interested in photorealism as an art movement?

SH: I understand and appreciate the skill that’s required to create it, but photorealism seldom moves me and I don’t cite any of the photorealists as influences on my art. The exception is Chuck Close who I consider to be a genius and whose work encompasses so much more than just one artistic movement. I also share a certain visual sensibility with Robert Bechtle, whose painting technique - using a bristle brush rather than an air brush - gives his work a warmth that is fairly unique in the genre.

ANA FINEL HONIGMAN is a critic, PhD candidate in art history at Oxford University and Senior London Correspondent for the Saatchi Gallery’s online magazine. She also contributes to Style.com, Grazia, Tank, Sleek and Harper’s Bazaar.