STUDIO VISIT

Napoleon Brousseau, Multidisciplinary

On September 20, 2015

Napoleon Brousseau is a Toronto-based artist. His work includes site-specific installations, drawing, painting, digital portraits and film. He’s exhibited work in Toronto since 1974 and his most recent show titled "In the Black" opened at Angell Gallery in September 2015. Among his various accolades, he graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design, co-founded Fastwurms and was the Director of Emmersive Gallery.

“I got malaria in the 1990’s and it created an astigmatism in my vision that causes me to hallucinate faces really easily. If I don’t control it, I can just sit there and find faces in everything. When I sketch, I make lines and then it evolves into an image."
For my show at Angell Gallery, I made charcoal drawings. I like charcoals, it’s how I clean my head. I use compressed Siberian charcoal with a hardness of twelve. Once it goes down, it sticks to everything. I draw quickly because I’m trying to do a purge of what’s in my head. I’m interested in suspending the inner critic when you work so that you’re not judging what you’re making. You’re just the vehicle, that’s it.

It took so long for art school to get out of my head. When I finished school, I joined the army. I wanted to get rid of that whole “art” thing. I wanted to lose my individuality in a system where you do what they tell you to do. It was good. It made me really strong because they make you do insane things. Now I just dive in, I’m not scared of the wilderness of things.”
“I paint with hand-cut rollers now. I roll the paint until faces emerge. Sometimes it takes three or four years, sometimes it happens in a year. It’s part serendipity and part meditation. You roll stripes, put colour down, hour after hour, until all of a sudden a little eyeball shows up. It’s a flicker of something, and then you keep rolling and rolling. Sometimes else emerges, and slowly I build these portraits.

When I was painting in the 1980’s, I noticed that my brushstrokes were the same as how my father taught me to house paint—up and down, up and down. I was the oldest of seven, so when I was eleven years old, I went to work with my father painting houses. I
was a little guy so I could go inside closets and get spots under the sink. It was a different time. I couldn’t do that to my daughter when she was that age.

I wanted to get rid of brushstroke so I started working with rollers. It’s a lot harder to make a statement with a roller. You don’t know where the paint is going to land. It’s a whole mystery that you’re unravelling.”
“My studio in the backyard is built from leftover TV show sets. I build props for shows. It took two years to stockpile all the material. Every time a show would end, I'd take away the parts they weren't going to use. I thought I'd have the studio for five years and it’s going on eight years, right now. It’s destined to be ripped out. It’s just starting to fall apart now. The studio lived it’s life, you know?”

—Napoleon Brousseau, as told to Studio Beat

Photos by Brittany Carmichael