



Artist Interview: Jason Jagel

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Songs of Innocence and Experience / Never No Mo Blues

Jason Jagel creates splendidly multi-sensorial works that evidence a beautiful sense of color, linework and a knack for cohesively organizing multitudinous pieces of imagery and open areas. Jagel recently contributed a lovely interview detailing his process, his approach to composition, inspiration, and much more.

Can you talk about your creative process, from the inception of an idea to the finished product?

I tend to work on many pieces at once, trying new things and letting paint dry and giving myself time to mull something over. It's a process where I continually reapproach a painting with a fresh point of view and respond to what's happened before. As a result though, my studio ends up collecting many unfinished works, large and small. There's so much potential, aka so many possibilities, in the beginning stages of something. Then, over time I revisit things, lose, find and rediscover pieces. Some of those get finished sooner some much later, more of the former when I'm working on a certain project.

With everything: shape, color, words and images I'm attempting a kind of story, looking for things that feel uncontrived and that stimulate my imagination. Open-ended or multiple entendre signs are great to me for the way they come alive, flickering through endlessly unfixable interpretations not unlike the flicker of a movie. Arrangement and pattern can do this too, with elements pointing towards or

associating with things other than themselves. Looking from thing to thing, I experience with peripheral (unfocused) perception the surroundings with as landscape.



Divining Rod / Shortsword Forcefield / My Mac-10 Weighs A Ton

What are some of your favorite sources of inspiration or visual ideas, whether musical, philosophical, mundane, etc...

In the best of times inspiration is flowing from all around from everyday experiences, my family, to artistic and cultural sources: books, records, comics, the radio, et cetera: from all of these come images, words, phrases, feelings, colors and shapes. Music is a special form where I can interact with it in the midst of working.

Many of your images feature a cacophony of vibrantly colored details—almost like a giant puzzle, can you talk about what you like about this Hieronymous Bosch- like horro vacui- filling the pages with detail?

Well, Josef Albers had an exercise where one would fill a page with various shapes repeated, for example, semi-circles or triangles or straight lines or their name written in cursive frontwards backwards upsidedown and upsidedown and backwards. The purpose was to practice visualization and concentration, not make a drawing. So on the one hand while letting the page fill up, I'm practicing having an "unfettered" consciousness, something Kurt Schwitters says is essential and a product of strict discipline. On the other, I am making a pattern, or puzzle, where I see the whole thing at once through peripheral vision, perceiving similarities (patterns) of shape color text or image. Then, with

central (foveal) vision I “read” the images and words, led from one to the next by pattern to imagine various stories or impressions of stories. I suspect it’s much like how I read comics: taking in the whole page at once and skipping around on various details and following the sequence too.



Reading & Writing

You mention Bosch. I identify with Pieter Breugel (the elder)’s Bosch-like tableau paintings depicting complex scenes with a level of detail that makes it feel like an alternate world. I’m amazed at the sophisticated level of interaction & activity in his works, the people in them appear unaware they’re in a painting. Seems to me that to make a viable world the author needs to believe in it themselves, their characters driving their own destiny. Sometimes I’m looking to pursue themes and ideas until it feels like a viable story, until there’s a duration to the making and subsequent “reading” that’s complex enough to believe in. I think on some level I want there to be enough information in there that I can’t take it all in at once, can’t exhaust it, and because of this, I’ll never move through the piece the same way twice.

How do you arrange your compositions?

Compositions work best for me when I have no preset notion of what it’s going to look like. I know what I like when I see it and when I don’t it nags at me.

Still others of your works feature an almost Rothko like simplicity, here I am thinking of “Angles without Edges,”—what prompts you to work in these (seemingly) somewhat oppositional idioms?

When working on many things at once I like to see a conversation unfold, with different approaches and strategies interacting (continuity & contrast) as an ever-unfolding story. It’s bothersome when too many things in my studio look the same. To me, it’s necessary to have a rhythm to the larger arrangement. You know I heard that Edvard Munch made prints in part because he didn’t want to sell his paintings as he felt they were all a part of some greater whole; an entire artwork.



Angles Without Edges

I'm happiest when making is a form of discovery where decisions and ideas lead to new things. Mostly, I make initial choices based on formal things, like working in pencil over paint or wanting to have certain types of colors or whatever, which can be part of making one piece distinct from the next. The fake record covers and record sculptures (*Angles Without Edges* is one of the latter, painted on a blank record jacket and constructed with a paper record emerging) are some of my many ongoing side-projects, each of which tends to develop its own set of rules / goals / desires.



Tribute to OLE / JWJ

The image of the vinyl record seems to recur within your works—and you've also designed a number of record covers—what do you love about this symbol, and how do you think musicality plays a role within your works, if at all?

Records are the greatest. They are a unending source of inspiration, full of ideas, feeling, words, images. As I said, I can live in music throughout my day. Goethe said music is frozen architecture. Vito Acconci said that that you can experience both while doing other things. I especially like to see records

as a history book, a document of a person, time and place; one chapter of a larger book that both exists in the past and is an inexorable part of the present; something a lot of invisible work went into. Records are rare, lost, imperfect, damaged, repaired, found, forgotten, studied, sampled, touched, felt, seen and read. Records are an analog document of time and are old and become new again.

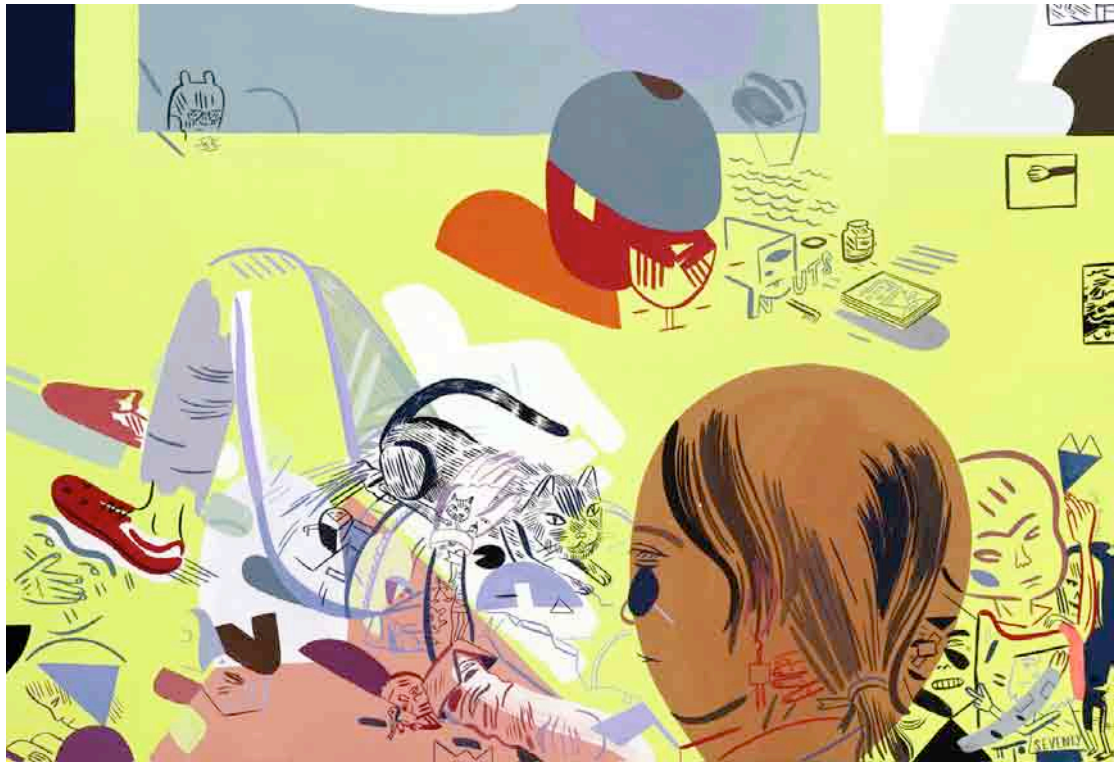
There is something in music where it's possible to see feelings and ideas as the same. In playing, whether basketball or writing or music, decisions are ideas manifest, but generated through in-the-moment intuitive response. There's no separation from higher mental functioning and emotion.



Paper Record

Many times small fragments of text abound throughout your work—what are these phrases and thoughts? How do you think word and image play off each other?

Chris Ware says he's applying rules of typography to how he draws images. I've been influenced by how he interconnects text and image to create a path through a story. He speaks of the ideal of drawing characters that take more effort not to read than to read. I like that quite a bit and to me image and text both have the ability to trigger imagination, but in different ways. I'm intrigued by what it takes to constitute a depiction of a face and the possibilities for variation, negation or confusion of that reference; "the syntax of comics." Often, the larger phrases of text coalesce through multiple interactions. So the poetry of it happens by at least in part by accident. Also, I think of what I do as writing as much as painting. There's a need similar to writing for me, as the writer, to believe in what I'm making, whether a color shape, a figure's gesture, an illusionary physical space or words. If something appears contrived or feels plastic or too obvious then I've got to destroy it. If I can believe in the way something appears then there's a chance that someone else will too.



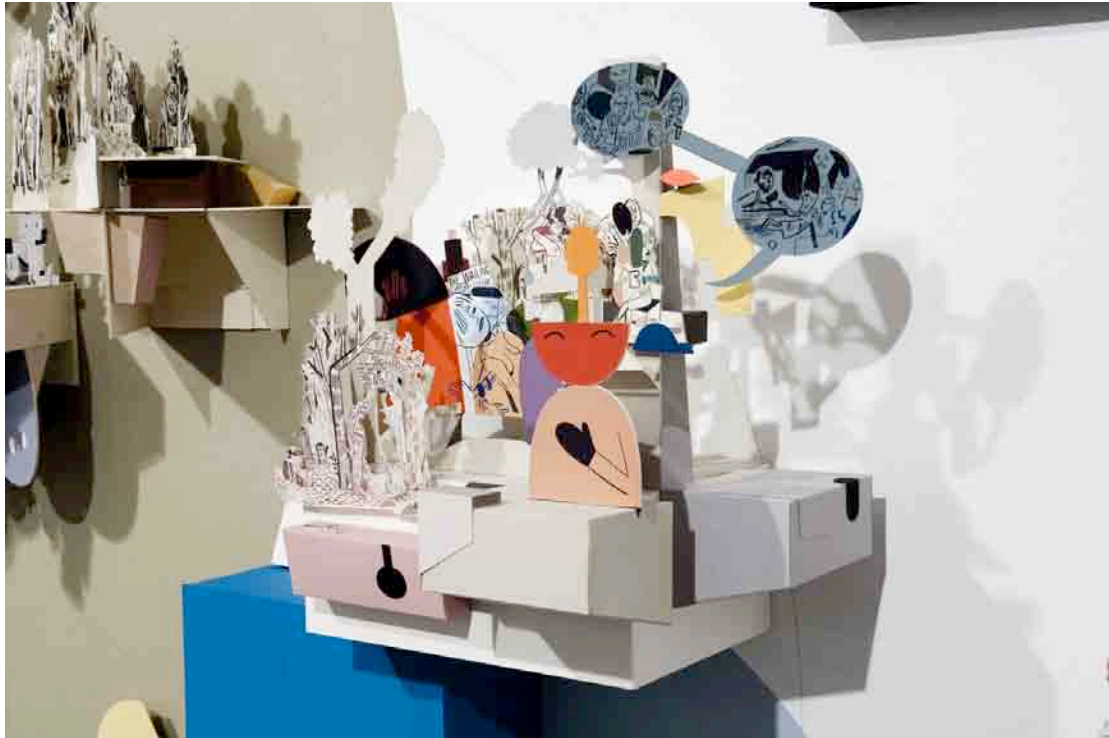
Ghost Image (detail)

You seem to have an uncanny sense of color—how do you approach palette within your works? How do you balance so many tones and hues while still getting them to work harmoniously?

Often, I'm looking to mix color that is between one hue and another so there's a margin of ambiguity. Similar, at times I try to mix colors that explore the boundary between saturated and unsaturated. Sometimes, I'm able to work with a palette of a few colors, other times I try to limit the number of colors and it ends up feeling forced and I have to reject that strategy. As far as balancing, I -obviously- love color and the way that colors interact (for example Josef Albers' relative color experiments), and I know what looks right when I see it. I tend to squint a lot, stand back from it and so forth. On the other hand, when I try to analytically decide on colors it's usually a flop. There's often a great distance between what goes on in my head and what happens in my hand.

Many of your sculptural work shares the same aesthetic as your 2-d drawings and paintings—can you talk about how you approach making the sculptures?

I set up the paper sculptures to work like my paintings, little to no preplanning and try to get something new out of it, take risks into difficult or unknown situations so I have to work by leaps of faith, rather than careful planning. They're made something like dioramas, with flat cut paper "scenes," then held together with fully-enclosed paper boxes (the strongest, most stable form of paper I can think of). So a lot of time goes into laying out, scoring, cutting and gluing these paper boxes. They seem analogous to the shapes of color I like to overlap with line-drawn images in my paintings. I can rearrange the images and structure somewhat modularly so I can see what it might look like in different forms. I don't want to be able to predict what it's going to look like in the end. I like the way that the boxes and the images each have their own distinct manner (one abstract but concrete the other specific but imaginary) and they can contrast and harmonize at the same time.



Listening By The C-Side (installation view detail)

In fact in some of the exhibitions you have created, such as at Richard Heller Gallery, you've literally transformed the space into a kind of living all-encompassing installation of your imagery—can you talk about why you choose to present your works in this way?

The installations are a result of wanting to feel the show as an artwork itself. I had a show back in 2001 where when I looked in the gallery all I saw was reflections on Plexiglas. That experience nudged me to try something different. Later, I thought of the installations as a kind of booby trap: boom! You're in the work before you can decide whether you're up for the effort.



P's & Q's (Installation View)



Keeping Time

Who are some of your favorite creatives and what do you admire about their work?

There's too many to list. Let's see, lately for music there's Hypnotic Brass Ensemble and The Philip Cohran Artistic Heritage Ensemble, Dam Funk, Patrick Adams productions, the People's Potential Unlimited label, Elvin Jones' drumming, Pluggy Satchmo, James Pants, Supreme Team, The Jahari Massamba Unit and the whole Stones Throw Massive. For a class I'm teaching called Word / Text / Image, I've been reading writings by Kurt Schwitters, Josef Albers, Chris Ware (all these characters talk about the need for an unfettered state of mind and the strict discipline required to achieve it) and others, also a cool piece by Jonathan Lethem called, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." Vikram Chandra is a favorite writer lately. Haruki Murakmai, Chester Brown, Max Beckmann have all been huge to me at one point or another.

What other projects are you currently working on?

I've got a solo show in Milan and one in Tuscany coming up, then in September a solo in Copenhagen. Opening Feb 20th is a group show in New York at David Krut Projects (he's from South Africa and an old friend of William Kentridge I gather) organized by master printer Phil Sanders. I'll be in a Phillips de Pury contemporary art auction in April, also in NY. In SF, group shows at 111 Minna in March and in May at the SF Arts Commission where I'll show a bunch of paper sculptures. Meanwhile, I'm angling to get started on another book and record project, and so far it looks promising.

To see more of Jason's work, visit: jasonjagel.com