

Punk Rock Poeticism

By Max Presneill, Torrance Art Museum



Untitled, 2011, mixed media assemblage, 24" x 16"

In writing about the work of Dave Tourjé, it is difficult to separate the background story from the art. His history, ranging from his early years embedded in the nascent skateboarding scene of Los Angeles, through his involvement in Punk Rock and the underground music milieu of the City of Angels, from *The Dissidents* to the Chouinard Foundation, all have obviously entered into his conception of the world and provided some of the core elements of his visual language bank as much as his art school training. For that generation growing up in the 1970's, that experience of skateboarding and punk first-hand, both instills an outsider status and a love of creativity, eventually leading, for many of us, to the contemporary art world. But I feel these are distractions from looking closely at the art itself -- his biography overwhelms an honest scrutiny of his art practice.

What do we actually see in the works themselves?

Sculptures

Intuitive, nostalgic, coastal (scavenger art from the beaches, in love with the ocean), wired together, so temporary an arrangement, found, discarded, ignored. A detritus, like skate and punk self-glamorization, without the anger of rejection, and certainly no longer underground. Like hearing a Sex Pistols instrumental version in a hotel lobby, weakened by the successes of the past and depleted of a cause to rebel against.

Despite this, they are densely poetic and weighty works, although their scale is small. The almost delicate thread and tie wire, like a drawn line that holds the elements together, seem transitory and makeshift, like the locations where they were found, an accident of time and place brought into existence for as long as they survive. This jigsaw of pieces balance precariously between safety and dissolution, their mute colors reinforcing an attempt to create a near organic harmony. Tourjé calls them "Accidentals." They are found over time, all over the city. They sit and simmer somewhere at the back of his attention before bursting forth in a flurry of collaging and

intuitive placement. Their visual appearance reminds me of George Herms work and the many followers of that style.

They are the outcome of a particularly common position here in sunny SoCal, one that sees the intuitive decision as more authentic and somehow of a purer nature. Of course, I disagree strongly with this position. I believe this to be good composition standing in for content, the history of the various



Untitled, 2011, mixed media assemblage, 20" x 7"

elements capturing our own sense of loss rather than anything inherent within the sculpture's parts. Art is never pure nor natural -- it is the sum of our beliefs and learned cultural behaviors, and carries all the history and baggage that suggests. Art is not truth. It is Art and is in no need of the truth, only its own interior logic.

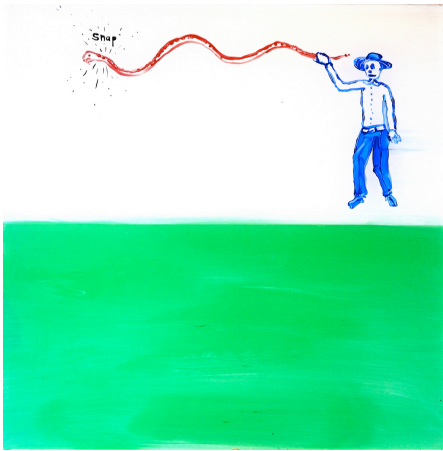
Paintings

The currently hip urban flavors of contemporary vernaculars, such as tattoo art, graffiti, street art and custom car culture, of surf and skate, all have provided the spices into the particular cauldron that is Los Angeles. From the bygone days when they were rebellious sub-cultures at the edges of acceptability, Tourjé has stirred his witches brew of influences, combining them to cook up a strange fragmented stew. His influences are clear and relate to his individual history – his relationship to the things he has done, rather than read about.

In Tourjé's paintings this is apparent. He takes source materials from those aspects of these sub-cultures, which he has been directly involved in. From his early exposure to the murals of the Mexican Masters, when he lived in Mexico City for awhile as a child, and the Chicano murals of Highland Park and East L.A. where he grew up, to the visual references collected from the underground movements of the 1970's that he found himself aligned with in the Los Angeles of that decade. It is in these formative years that provide the staple elements in his paintings. We can identify such influences as the Dogtown Skates winged skulls, and the spray painted scrawl of the gangster Vato Rat of the Bones Brigade's early incarnations, originating in the gang signs and turf graffiti of East L.A., emigrating to the skate kids of Venice and Santa Monica -- seen morphing and emerging in Tourjé's other animals, strongly outlined and angular. The surf rat and others appear as strong graphic images. The colors that spill from the picture plane resonate with the

punk inspired graphics from the undersides of Vision, Dogtown and other skateboard subcultures -- the inheritors of Wess Humpston's attention to a text-based and, later, image-based design aesthetic, and they do have that surfboard/resin slickness so typical in L.A. art (from the light & space artists of the 60's onwards), due to his process of painting on the backside of an acrylic glass.

Cultural icons, such as Frankenstein's Monster, sit alongside Tourjé's own set of self-referential icons-- the 4-pointed star shape, the scrawled circle around an image that links us back to the full-pipe of the skateboarder or the



tunnel wave of the surfer -- both of which refer to the perfect moment, in the zone, at one with movement and existential self-hood, time slowing in that moment of non-thinking concentration.

For all their frenetic color, they still remain based in this clarity of the still experience and oneness, their action a very zen-like way itself, despite the anti-hippy sentiments of the punker in Tourjé. They lack the rancor and cynicism of punk now. The soul surfer has bled into

them, age mellowing out the fraught edge and replaced with a bubbling energy that releases an effervescent positivity.

They can also echo Jean-Michel Basquiat's work -- sub-divisions of blocked out color, the odd shaped supports and image-text relationships-- both illustrational and street at the same time, with a pictorial naïveté that belies the complexity of their composition --related via a jazz-like syncopation of style and rhythm, the dissonance and dislocation of odd juxtapositions. The stencils remind one of DIY street sign and Locals Only territorialism, telling us of the secret spot and the hermetic world of the sub-cultures they come from. They are related to the Lowbrow art movement but divorced from some street art's intimacy with corporate sponsorship.

They retain the gritty urbanism and immediacy of the city environment -- panels of color and disparate images, like the cacophony of billboards along Sunset Blvd. They have an authenticity in their link to a real experience, albeit linked to a youth that has passed -- memorializing and fighting against the aging process (yes, people do age in California, too), but without being

laden with the angst of its oncoming. Are they melancholic for a lost youth? I would say so. Who doesn't consider this regularly when one has passed the age of 40? But the paintings do not appear trapped within that lost world. Rather, they play with its positive vibes and memories to retain relevance for us and the Dave Tourjé who exists now. These works are assemblages of events and sources, collages of images and meanings that show us the real experience of growing up in Californian at his point in history.

Max Presneill

Artist and curator Max Presneill has exhibited in New York, London, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Mexico City, Sydney, Istanbul, Paris, and other cities around the world. His paintings are represented by Durden and Ray Fine Art, Los Angeles. Presneill is currently Head Curator at the Torrance Art Museum and is the Founder and former Director of Raid Projects in Los Angeles (1998-2008). From 2005-8 he was the Director/Curator for the Mark Moore Gallery. ■