

WESTERN EXHIBITIONS

RICHARD HULL
interviewed by
ALEX BRADLEY COHEN

Richard Hull has been painting in Chicago for 40 years and teaching at the School of the Art Institute (SAIC) for 15 years. He began showing at the ground-breaking Phyllis Kind Gallery in 1978 right before he graduated from SAIC, catching the tailwind of the Chicago Imagists and pushing the materiality of paint since. His wonky, out-of-touch, problematic heads — inner mirrors where repetitive thinking and behaviors — are events of self-discovery and learning. When I was an undergraduate at SAIC I took two painting classes with Hull and his insight to see beyond what is seen in a painting, past the image into painting materiality, was inspirational to me as a young painter. I know his influence is mass. — Alex Bradley Cohen, February 2018

This is honestly my first interview so I don't know what I am doing. We can end up here-and-there or in a bottomless pit. But let's start it off right. How about we start at the beginning? A real quick brief summary of how and when you ended up in Chicago.
Ugh, 40 years later and I'm still telling the same boring story.

This isn't for me Rich.

Yeah yeah, so I moved to Chicago 40 years ago this past January, for grad school at SAIC. It's a long time to stay in one place.

Ha, tell me about it. I've been here 28, I'm probably never going to leave. What is it about Chicago that has kept you here painting for so long?
I have... and have had a great life here. I hate it when people complain about Chicago. There's so much to complain about but I don't think Chicago should be it. I mean, we can complain about the politics of the city and the way bodies and economies circulate, but the actual city of Chicago has so much to offer. The past 40 years has given me much. I have had an amazing experience here that goes beyond the visual art world. For a while I sort of dropped out of the art community as I stopped going to openings and started meeting writers, musicians and people in theater.

Hmmm... it's interesting to think about theater and the influence that it has had on your early work. When you were developing these narratives in your work from the '80s — the street scenes or conceptual stages where events occur — did these paintings come from your involvement in the theater community or was it something else you were trying to depict?

No, I wouldn't necessarily say the paintings came from a direct influence of being around theater. They more came out of necessity. I needed a place for my characters. I thought of these characters as people and really wanted them to exist in a reality, a non-scripted place, as opposed to theater's scripted one.

Fast-forward 40 years and you are still painting characters or attitudes but now just in the form of a head. Can you speak on this?

I'm thinking about these characters of having limitless potential while simultaneously creating specific recognition.

What was the process like for you to get to this point? How did you make the shift from making the more narrative scenes to where everything is so focused on a head? What does the head do for you that the scenes stopped doing?

It came by chance from a backdrop I collaborated on with Dan Grzeca for a performance at the Cultural Center by Ken Vandermark. It was an exquisite corpse. The image was the Trojan horse, one of the sections I painted was the tail end. I really loved the shape of the tail and the rump of the horse and that led to paintings using those shapes. I was thinking of continuous form where one thing empties into another. Soon thereafter a friend turned me on to the Klein bottle, which began to stabilize the image for me, also presents ambiguity and I like that. Once I was able to isolate this shape, I began to discover the heads.

That's interesting to think that these frontal heads that represent limitless possibilities came from an ending of some sort, that you had to work your way from a horse's rump to a person's face. Quick question, do these characters have gender?

Gender is something I actually don't think of at all. The earlier paintings always had a female side and a male side but that was to develop some symmetry that helped resolve the paintings. These are non-gender; I think it would mess me up if they had gender. I would start worrying about symbolism and things that would symbolize a specific gender — color being a big part of it. And I don't want the color to start employing strategies that talk about gender. I would rather just use it in a way to characterize a personality... so I guess we are done here? (Richard gets up)

Hell no! We gotta keep talking! I've never done this before. Let's go back once again and do a little personal timeline.

Ok! I came here in 1978 during a huge snowstorm, there was a foot of snow everywhere.

Did you know you wanted to be an artist early on?

Oh yeah I knew right away when I was a little kid because I could draw. I just drew all the time and I was really good at it. And if you're good at something people say, "Oh that's nice," so you keep doing it. When I was around 6, I got the neighborhood kids together and I was going to teach them how to draw. I couldn't believe that they couldn't do it. I was confused, it seems so simple to just draw it the way it looks. I kept thinking they weren't trying.

So you're a natural born teacher, artist, and bully. But you actually aren't that much of a bully, are you?

Maybe just a little bit in my classroom.

How old were you when you moved to Chicago and met the Imagists and started working with them?

24

Did you know of the Imagists before you came to Chicago?

Coming from Kansas City where there was the heavy influence of West Coast funk artists like William T. Wiley, Robert Hudson and Robert Arneson. I could've gone to school out there but decided to go somewhere where I wasn't so influenced by the artists. Though I knew of and respected the Imagists, I didn't come to Chicago because of them, I came to get my MFA at SAIC. But to my happy surprise in a little over a year after arriving I started showing at the Phyllis Kind Gallery, which represented most of the Imagists.

Funny story is that my teacher, Ron Slowinski at the Kansas City Art Institute, where I got my BFA, was from Chicago and he took us up to Chicago for a trip and we went to a Barbara Rossi opening at Phyllis Kind Gallery. There was bar and a bartender who had on a white tux. It was a show of Barbara's beautiful drawings and all were sold, for \$900 each. I was counting all the money she [Rossi] made in my head. Of course I didn't know that artists had to give half of it to the gallery! Two years later I was at my own opening at the same gallery, with the same bartender.

Wanna talk about color? What are your color references today? Still Velasquez?

I don't make literal color references. I basically begin with one color and react to it with another.

Are they moods?

No, I like to think of the color as an event. Everything in the painting is an event that adds up to a whole.

What about the repetition of form in the paintings?

I see the repetitive forms within the head as rhythms. These rhythms are a representation of time, one moment to the next.

What about the repetition of images from painting to painting?

The repetition of image from one painting to next is also a kind of rhythm; variations large and small can accumulate. Though the work certainly looks similar from piece to piece, each time I begin something new I start with a notion that is different from the last, pushing the boundaries of the work, but then pulling it back in, until it's something I want to look at, sort of moving forward while staying in place. I've used many different kinds of imagery over the years, each time sticking with an idea for a while and mining all the possibilities.

Do the heads have anything to do with contemporary issues surrounding social media and narcissism?

Maybe, but I mostly see them as mirrors, especially the new sculptural pieces that take the actual form of a vanity mirror, with a nod to among others, the Rogier Van Der Weyden two-sided painting in the Art Institute of Chicago. I have always been interested in two opposing forces in a painting.

Giving things dual meanings? Is it an imagined and a real space, or a conversation?

Well, I think of everything as real in my paintings, and it is also about situating a conversation within the painting. It is a basic conversation between the color and the forms. And not a literal conversation; paintings do not talk to you.

Paintings don't talk?

Thank god. They tell you things but they don't talk.

What are you trying to get these paintings to say?

I'm trying to get them to resolve themselves.

How do you name these paintings after you silence them?

I don't name them till after the event. I find their titles in poems and I initial the poets name on the back when I'm done. I see them as a dedication to the poem and poet rather than a painting about the poem; an homage.

Similar to fellow Chicago artist Phil Hanson?

No, not necessarily. He uses the actual words of poems in his paintings. It's not like that at all for me; I use words from poems to title the paintings with the hope that there is a kind of reverberation between the poem and painting. Only once did I try to think of a poem and make a painting about it. It was a disaster. So I just make the paintings and name them afterwards.

What does the painting process look like for you? You make drawings and paintings that speak to each other but your process is a little different than most artists.

For me it's always been the paintings that inform the drawings rather than the drawings informing the paintings. The crayons I use to make the drawings are unforgiving, paint is a lot more flexible, allowing for discovery.

What is the discovery?

A new shape or a form might make me think of something else. For instance, the exquisite corpse of a Trojan horse led me to the Klein bottle and that lead me to the heads. Discovering an image by that process is what makes me feel most connected to the image. I want everything in the paintings to feel real, and when they get too disconnected or abstracted they begin to disintegrate and reality slips away.

Forty years later what has painting given you?

It has given me a great deal of satisfaction. It has given me access to very interesting people.

It now seems like you are trying to paint all these interesting characters. It's also interesting when shapes become features.
Yeah giving these characters features is kinda freaking me out. It's been happening a little bit lately, I don't want it get to contrived.

Like the eyeballs?
But they aren't eyeballs in eyeball positions.

But they are still eyeballs. Let's wrap this up. Who are these people?
They are unknown people. Like I said I don't want them to be literal

So in a sense they are about people that you don't know?
Yeah I like that. I like the distance.

But you like people?
I like the wide range of things, including people.

Would you let me paint on these paintings?
Sure, I'll let you then I'll paint over it. We will have to paint with oil.

Gotcha. What advice would you give to a younger artist moving to Chicago for grad school?
Always be ready.

Man, I feel like I'm always ready for it to end.
It will.

Ha-ha.
I was talking about career, not about making things; making things never ends.

ALEX BRADLEY COHEN (b. 1989) is a painter living in Chicago. His work has been included in solo and two-person exhibitions at The Luggage Store, San Francisco, CA; Mana Contemporary, Chicago, IL; and Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago, IL, among others. Cohen has shown in group exhibitions at The Studio Museum of Harlem, New York, NY; The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, IL; Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY; and The Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA. He will have a solo show at Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago in Fall 2018. He is a 2014 alumni of the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture.

RICHARD HULL (b. 1955 Oklahoma City, OK) has paintings, drawings and prints in the collections of several museums including the Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Smithsonian Museum, Washington, D.C.; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Smart Museum, Chicago. He has exhibited his work at many of the above institutions as well as Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City; the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT; Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, OH; Portland Art Museum, OR; the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH; Herron Gallery of Art, Indianapolis, IN; Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI; Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston IL; and the Painting Center, New York, NY. He joined the legendary Phyllis Kind Gallery before graduating from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in 1979 and had numerous shows in both her New York City and Chicago locations. Richard Hull is represented by Western Exhibitions, Chicago.